

THE BEJEWELLED PIG SNOUT:
APPROPRIATE USE OF HUMOR IN PREACHING

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To Jean, Seth, Aaron and Devon
who have taught me in the most amazing ways
that life, love, and the service of the Lord
are always better when enjoyed with a healthy dose of humor

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ABSTRACT

The *Bejeweled Pig Snout: Appropriate Use of Humor in Preaching* offers an assessment of the compatibility of humor with the modern preaching experience. It contains an examination of Old and New Testament examples of humor, along with an apologetic for its continued use by today's proclaimers of Gospel truth. The various types, styles and sources of humor are catalogued, along with a nonprofessional's look at how humor works from both a psychological and physiological standpoint. The project likewise contains a collection of suggestions and warnings for making the best use of this powerful communication tool.

The study provides a methodology for gauging the effectiveness of any particular piece of humor in a given setting. It also includes a means of categorizing the four different types of humor and explores how each can best be implemented in the construction of a sermon. A seminar addressing the various concepts examined by the thesis concludes the work and makes a case for the suitability of properly understood and applied humor as a compelling and effective component in the communication of the message of the Gospel.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Few people would argue with the notion that humor is one of the most powerful tools available to the practitioners of oral communication. Statesmen, lawyers, corporate executives, reporters, self-help gurus, even infomercial salespeople routinely employ this device to improve the reception and palatability of the message they wish to deliver. Used properly, the effectiveness of the method speaks for itself, appealing to individuals on a very personal, very human level.

Yet despite its widespread acceptance in other venues, something of a haze has always surrounded its use in the pulpit. Not that there has been any real shortage in that area, of course, few indeed are the individuals who have neither heard nor told a so-called “preacher joke.” But volume aside, there has never been any real consensus as to its suitability for use in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Among preachers, some heartily endorse it, using it (and occasionally *over-using* it) at every available opportunity; while others with equal passion and conviction oppose it outright, convinced the method is beneath the dignity and station of someone called to serve as the mouthpiece of God. As early as 1418, for instance, The Second Council of Constance declared that “If any cleric or monk speaks jocular words, such as provoke laughter, let him be anathema.”¹ Similarly, David Martin Lloyd-Jones has declared, “Light entertainment, easy familiarity and jocularity (joking) are not compatible with a realization of the seriousness of the condition of the souls of all men by nature, the fact

¹ The Second Council of Constance, quoted by Robert Byrne in *The 2,548 Best Things Ever Said*, (Galahad Books, New York, NY, 1996), 556.

that they are lost and in danger of eternal perdition, and their consequent need of salvation. Not only that, such methods cannot bring out the Truth; and our business is to preach the Truth. These methods may affect people psychologically and in other respects, and they may lead to 'decisions'; but our object is not merely to get decisions, it is to bring people to a knowledge of the Truth." ² Situated somewhere between the staunch advocates and the equally stalwart detractors, are many others who employ humor sparingly, exhibiting many of the same reservations a tightrope walker might have upon noticing a fray in the cord upon which he is standing.

Is the use of humor appropriate in preaching the Gospel? Is it fitting for a venue that routinely speaks to matters of life, death, and eternity to employ what some would describe as a 'questionable' method for capturing the audience's attention with no greater justification than the hope that, with its use, the rest of their message will perhaps be heard?

Is there scriptural precedent for its use? Most individuals who have read the Bible with any degree of regularity have happened upon passages that contain statements or situations which struck them as funny, but was that the original intent, or merely some coincidence or misinterpretation?

Beyond these questions, no one would disagree that humor itself is something of a two-edged sword, particularly when it fails to accomplish its intended purpose. In this regard the most telling question is: Do its benefits outweigh its risks? For certainly all humor is not created equal. If we conclude that humor does have a place, then we must

² David Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1972), 10.

ask, What is it that determines whether a certain type of humor is appropriate or not? Where does one draw the line between the humorous and the merely ridiculous? What is humor anyway? And can its raw energy ever properly be harnessed to serve the interests of the Kingdom of God? These are some of the questions this project will explore.

IMPORTANCE

There is a need for a theology of humor in preaching. Most thoughtful preachers, regardless of their religious background and training, have at times struggled with the question as to whether humor is an appropriate means of communicating a message as critical and serious as the one they have been called upon to deliver. Many continue to weigh the pros and cons of its use in a humor-saturated society without any real confidence or direction for its application.

Practically every churchgoer can relate a horror story or two of an attempted funny story from the pulpit that simply was not. And beyond the temporary embarrassment experienced by the originator, no records are kept of the collateral damage inflicted upon the ensuing message by such a failed attempt. This damage may evidence itself as a self-inflicted distraction that presents an enormous hurdle for the beginning of the message (and which may continue to distract throughout) or a mere cheapening of the preaching experience that leaves the audience feeling as though they have been the victims of an attempted, albeit unsuccessful manipulation. Humor is a powerful force, more powerful than we often surmise. It can also be a powerful tool, but

only if it is handled with a degree of skill and sophistication that only a thoughtful study of its makeup and characteristics can provide.

THE PROJECT AND PROCEDURE

This project will involve research for the presentation of a seminar addressing several considerations in the use of humor in preaching while at the same time providing groundwork for the composition of a book on the subject. Beginning with an analysis of Old and New Testament examples of humor, the work will offer an apologetic for its continued use as an appropriate and powerful tool for modern communicators of the Word. The intent is that both the seminar and the ensuing book be presented at a level that will make it accessible for young ministers, but also contain useful information and suggestions that will benefit more veteran speakers as well.

This project will address the different types, styles, and sources of humor and offer suggestions for employing them to their best advantage. The work will also provide warnings against many of the pitfalls inherent in certain types of humor, particularly those that offer no real connection or benefit to the message being presented. Finally, a layman's look at the psychology behind the humor response will be presented, and suggestions will be offered for examining and anticipating the reaction of various audiences. This will include a review of the various mechanics of presentation that either improve or detract from the use of humor in a public setting.

The seminar, offering a broad-brush version of the precepts of this project will be taught at either a collegiate or an associational church level. Responses gleaned from the

seminar will offer an opportunity to evaluate both the content and method of the teaching as well as the value and relevance of the information provided in various ministry settings.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The Bible itself offers the best advice for doing theology in matters of faith and practice. It would then seem only reasonable that with regard to this subject, a good starting point would be a thorough examination of what the Bible has to say about humor, and more specifically, how the Bible itself uses humor in communicating its message to its readers. From these theological moorings, we can then begin to develop a twenty-first century approach for the use of humor in the modern church, particularly within the area of preaching.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that there are now, and always have been, any number of devout, intelligent souls who have sought humor in the pages of Scripture and found none. From Methodist founder John Wesley who exhorted his students in light of the weight of their message to see that their “whole deportment before the congregation be serious, weighty, and solemn,”³ to the rather remarkable conclusion drawn by A. N. Whitehead that “the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literatures.”⁴ Even advertising Hall of Famer John Caples once remarked that, “The two most influential books in the world have no humor in them:

³ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 14, (Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, reprint, [1970]), 317.

⁴ A. N. Whitehead, cited in *Dialogues*, Lucien Price, ed., (Little and Brown Publishers, Boston, MA, 1953), 30.

the Bible and the Sears Catalog!”⁵ Many are those, in their day and ours, who find its pages completely devoid of humor of any kind. Thundering warnings, flaming exhortations, urgent pleadings - yes, in abundance; but humor - no, none at all.

But is this conclusion correct? Brilliance and accomplishments aside, could such an assessment possibly be accurate? The Bible *is* a serious work. In its sixty-six books it conveys the message of the creation, fall, and opportunity for redemption of the human race by the ultimate sacrifice of a loving, all powerful, all knowing, ever present and eternal God. It speaks to matters of history and logic, life and eternity, and to the identity and actions of a sovereign Creator. Weighty matters indeed, yet, at its heart, the Bible is also a very practical book, both in its message and in its methodology. One might then query what more practical method could exist for communicating with humankind, than to occasionally utilize their inherent appreciation and love of humor?

It should also be noted that not all theologians share the rather bleak assessment of their forebears. Conrad Hyers, for instance, states:

Comic devices are by no means foreign to the Bible. They are not always easy to see because of the enormous problems in trying to translate puns, plays upon words, ironic twists, and satirical illusions. We usually miss the punch line and the point as well. As we say, it loses something in translation. Humorous expressions and the contexts that make them humorous are the most difficult items to convey from one language to another, even with cumbersome footnotes or parenthetical explanations – and once explained, they cease to be humorous anyway.⁶

⁵ John Caples, *Tested Advertising Methods*, (Prentice Hall Trade, Lebanon, IN, 1980), 32.

⁶ Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy*, (John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA, 1987), 3.

Similarly, Lee van Rensburg has written, “Humor is a God-given and spiritual gift which is good; it appears to be universal; and it is reasonable to anticipate its presence in holy writings as anywhere else.”⁷

In addition, Cal Samra has noted, “In one New Testament concordance there are 287 references to joy, gladness, merriment, rejoicing, delighting, laughing, etc.”⁸ This would certainly seem to call into question the completely “serious nature” of Holy writ and suggest at least the possibility, if not the probability, that humor likewise may dwell among its pages.

These later scholars are not shy in offering up explanations for why many past theologians have failed to recognize humor in the Bible. Perhaps Hyers offers the simplest, “Comic themes and devices are also not easily seen because of the prevailing assumption that such elements do not exist in Holy Scriptures. A person who is not open to the possibility of comic elements is not likely to be looking for instances or to see them, even by accident. The biblical writers, it is assumed, were a humorless lot.”⁹

To this, van Rensburg adds:

It is regrettable that while laughter is frequently enjoyed among the members of a church community, there is a hesitancy in linking humor to the Scriptures, and especially to the teachings of Jesus. Many are uneasy and reluctant to welcome laughter into the sanctuary and the worship service. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this state of affairs, including Catholic asceticism; an austere Protestant puritan heritage; a 19th century legacy emphasizing the divine wrath and judgment; the focus of the faith on the agony, suffering, passion, death,

⁷ Lee van Rensburg, *The Sense of Humor: In Scripture, Theology and Worship*, (Fairway Press, Lima, OH, 1991), 20.

⁸ Cal Samra, *The Joyful Christ: The Healing Power of Humor*, (Harper & Rowe Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 1985), 67.

⁹ Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, 4.

and crucifixion of Jesus; and the problems encountered in multi-translations (from Aramaic to Greek to Latin to King James' English). Peculiar to humor in the Scriptures is the recognized fact that body language, an important part of all communication, and essential to humor, cannot be transcribed, thus rendering many portions of Scripture flat and literal. This unfortunate accretion of factors ...has all but stifled the comic spirit in the Scripture and worship....¹⁰

Add to this, the problem of literalism, "Literalism narrows meaning to exactly what is said and flattens it to surface dimensions. As it tries to take a joke literally, the subtle nuances, the double meanings, the play on words - above all - the humor gets lost."¹¹ Another "...factor that detracts from the easy recognition of humor in the Scripture is that of the dubious legacy our century has received from the almost stifling interest that the last century showed in the divine wrath and judgment. Many preachers of that era felt it necessary to dangle their listeners over the flames of a burning hell. While the intent may have been to drive souls into the kingdom of heaven, the side effect was to drive all notions of humor out of the Bible and religion itself."¹²

But perhaps the most likely culprit of all is singled out by Larry Taylor when he offers, "The main reason we miss Jesus' humor is the fact that we worship him, and that is usually serious business."¹³ This failure to recognize or accept humor in the Bible has led to some serious consequences. Frederick W. Danker has assessed that "Humor is of the essence of life, and some of the supposed irrelevances of the Christian message may be charged up to the failure to appreciate the biblical perspective of humor and

¹⁰ Van Rensburg, *The Sense of Humor*, 15.

¹¹ Hyers, 3.

¹² Van Rensburg, 20.

¹³ Larry M. Taylor, "In Celebration of Humor," *The Student*, (April 1984), 15.

laughter.”¹⁴ To an even greater extent, Eugene J. Fisher has charged that “without the capacity to laugh, the Bible is cut off from the human condition. Without humor, there is no irony, without irony no tragedy. Without tragedy, there is no Good News.”¹⁵

Encouraging as each of these observations may be, a more convincing argument for the presence of humor in the Scriptures does not lie in the opinions and observations of human beings at all, but rather in the answer to one key question. If we believe as the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16 that the Bible is “God-breathed,” then one persuasive indicator as to the likely presence or absence of humor in the Scripture lies with the answer to the question, Does God Himself have a sense of humor?

On this point as well, theologians are divided. John Morreall reasons that “God cannot be surprised at anything because He knows the past, present, and future. Since God is a changeless Being, nothing that happens could amuse Him. He would already know about all the possible incongruities of life, and He would not be able to experience the psychological shift that, according to some, is behind all laughter.”¹⁶ In simpler terms, since God is incapable of experiencing surprise, he is also incapable of experiencing humor. On the opposing end of the spectrum, we have no less a theologian than G. K. Chesterton who confides that he “...often thought that the gigantic secret of God is mirth.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Frederick W. Danker, “Laughing With God,” *Christianity Today*, (January 1967), 11.

¹⁵ Eugene J. Fisher, “The Divine Comedy: Humor in the Bible,” *Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 72, no. 6, (Taylor & Francis, Philadelphia, 1977), 571.

¹⁶ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, (State University of New York Press, New York, NY, 1983), 126.

¹⁷ G. K. Chesterton quoted in Earl F. Palmer, ed., *The Humor of Jesus, Sources of Laughter in the Bible*, (Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2001) 15.

The simplest end to this dilemma would be if there were convincing scriptural evidence to support the conclusion that at least on one occasion, God Himself exhibited a sense of humor. If God's laughter was ever documented in Scripture, perhaps the argument would be settled, at least for most people. But on this particular score, there is, as the old saying goes, good news and bad news.

The good news is that the Bible does record at least two occasions on which God laughed, the corresponding bad news however, arrives almost simultaneously with a one-two punch. First, most critics dismiss these references outright as the pinnacle of anthropomorphism and poetic license, but even if those arguments are conceded, there is still a greater problem.

The simple truth is that when God is recorded as laughing in the Scriptures, the circumstances surrounding the response are far from anything any self-respecting isogote would be willing to offer as a 'proof text.' The fact is, He is found laughing at people. And not because they are doing anything we would remotely consider as funny. Rather they are portrayed as deadly serious and actively engaged in open rebellion against Him.

In Psalm 2, we are told, "He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them." This might be convincing if the people being scoffed at were stand-up comedians, but instead this statement is preceded by the question "Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing?" The answer? "The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed."

In Psalm 37, we find the observation that "The Lord laughs at him; for He sees his day is coming." If the day spoken had some hilarious connotation attached to it, this might be just the evidence we are seeking, but again in this case, the response is

generated by the fact that “The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes at him with his teeth.”

We all recognize that laughter generated by scorn or ridicule is not remotely similar to laughter in response to what we would identify as humor. So this might appear to summarily dismiss the hypothesis we are attempting to examine, were it not for one thing. If the argument is to be posed that God does not possess a sense of humor, the question that naturally follows is, then where did we human beings get ours? And before it is credited to a mere survival response generated by living in a fallen world, we would still face the unavoidable fact that human beings are created in the image of God. So the more telling question becomes, “Is the inherent sense of humor found in humankind a part of the *imago Dei*?”

Admittedly, the Scripture does not specifically state that a sense of humor was a part of the divine creative activity. But to this Hyers insightfully notes that, “Although it is true that Genesis 1 does not mention laughter or humor as aspects of the image and likeness of God, neither does it mention any of these other attributes...[human personality, language, reason, conscience, imagination, creativity, aesthetic awareness, religiousness.]”¹⁸ Extending that line of thinking even further, van Rensburg offers,

The highest act of creation is a reflection of the divine (Genesis 1:27). It is humor, among the other spiritual gifts to man in the *imago Dei*, that sets man apart from the rest of creation and enables him to enjoy what the rest of creation cannot. It is difficult to conceive of the Creator bestowing such a gift as humor upon man while failing to enjoy the dimensions of the gift within the divine Self. Simple syllogistic logic affirms that you cannot have in the conclusion that which is not in

¹⁸ Hyers, 16.

the premise. Far more acceptable is the affirmation that because humor is first in the Divine, so also it is given as a gift to man in his *imago Dei*.¹⁹

If this line of reasoning bears weight, then what explanation can be offered for the necessary admission that the Scriptures never portray God as personally exhibiting a sense of humor? Since no one has seen God at any time, it is a moot point to say that no one could ever categorically state what God's response to a humorous situation would be. But that being said, is it possible that evidence of His humor could be manifested in some other way? Specifically, has He ever employed humor in his interaction with the denizens of planet earth?

And here, several possibilities arise. In the Old Testament, the first reference to human laughter occurs within the saga of Abraham and Sarah, at the announcement of the pending birth of their promised heir. In light of Abraham's recorded reaction in Genesis 17 and Sarah's in Genesis 18, it is rather difficult to miss the tongue-in-cheek irony in God's command to name the chosen child "Isaac," literally, "laughter." Mere coincidence, perhaps? Then what of God Himself proclaiming conniving Jacob the winner of a divine wrestling match in Genesis 32? It is rather hard to imagine a bout that leaves you with a life long limp while your opponent disappears without so much as a scratch as much of a victory. Moreover, can anyone with a normal fear of snakes not find some degree of hilarity in God's command to Moses to reclaim his rod turned serpent by seizing it by the tail in Exodus 4? Or the Almighty's not so thinly veiled frustration when He promises to provide the grumbling wilderness wanderers with meat "until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you." (Numbers 11:20b)

¹⁹ Van Rensburg, 34.

Arguably, the most publicized example of Old Testament humor is that of the talking donkey rebuking Balaam in Numbers 22. But a similar humor may also be visible in the angel of the Lord's salutation to Gideon upon finding him winnowing wheat in a wine press (an indefensible act of fear and desperation) with the greeting, "the Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." (Judges 6:12)

Perhaps in a less direct manner, divine humor may also be discovered in the often pointed wit of the wisdom literature. Especially persuasive among these collections are some classically comedic lines directed at certain groups. Uniquely stinging, for instance, are the rebukes for fools - edgy humor with a violent twist, not so removed from the repertoire of some twenty-first century practitioners. Proverbs 17:10, gives us, "A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred blows into a fool," or Proverbs 27:22, "Though you pound a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him," or equally graphic, Proverbs 26:3, "A whip is for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools." It seems even the warnings to avoid the fool and his foolishness are equally scathing, as in Proverbs 17:12, "Let a man meet a bear robbed of her cubs, rather than a fool in his folly," or Ecclesiastes 10:1, "Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor."

In similar fashion, the lazy prove equally good targets for the imagery conjured up by this strain of rapier wit. In Proverbs 10:26 we find, "Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the lazy one to those who send him," or Proverbs 26:14-15, "As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard upon his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, he is weary of bringing it to his mouth again."

Meddlers in the affairs of others receive similar condemnation, "Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him." (Proverbs 26:17)

Loose and argumentative women also generate sparks. Proverbs 11:22 declares, "As a ring of gold in a swine's snout so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion." Proverbs 25:24 gives us, "It is better to live in a corner of the roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman," while Proverbs 27:15 says, "A constant dripping on a day of steady rain and a contentious woman are alike; he who would restrain her restrains the wind, and grasps oil with his right hand."

It should be remembered of course, that the author of each of these maxims finds no humor in the actions of these particular individuals, but rather laces his stinging retorts with a measure of humor to insure that they will be heard, considered, and remembered. And although this may be considered a simple literary device in order to make the saying more memorable, it is at the same time, the stuff of solid comedy, even by today's standards.

The field of Old Testament humor is by no means depleted at this point. Perhaps God's sense of humor is even more evident in the utterances of His prophets, as Henry Spalding observes,

Take *Isaiah* for example. Its pages bristle with humor, parody and biting wit. ("Woe unto them who are mighty to drink wine.") We also find sarcasm in the earlier prophets. When Achish, King of Gath, looked at David who was simulating insanity, he exclaimed, "Have I need of madmen that you have brought this fellow to play the madman?" Then there is the withering sarcasm of Elijah when he taunts the prophets of Baal: "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must

be awakened.”²⁰

With little effort, we may add to these, Isaiah 44:14-17, an eyes-wide-open indictment of the folly and futility of idol worship:

Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak and raises it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. Then it becomes something for a man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire, over this half he casts meat as he roasts a roast and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire.” But the rest of it he makes into a god. He falls down before it and worships it; he also prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god.”

Amos' choice of words in rebuking the ladies of leisure in the southern kingdom likewise is tinged with stinging humor: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring now, that we may drink!' The Lord God has sworn by his holiness, 'Behold, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with meat hooks, and the last of you with fish hooks.'" (Amos 4:1-2)

Sometimes this humor takes a surprising direction, as in Jonah's complaint directed to the Lord, as he realizes that God intends to have mercy on the inhabitants of Ninevah. In Jonah 4:2b he prays, "...Please, Lord, was this not what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."

²⁰ Henry D. Spalding, ed., *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor: From Biblical Times to the Modern Age*, (Jonathan David Publishers, New York, NY 1969), xiv.

Isaiah's words of God's impending judgment in other passages sometimes bear a sarcasm bordering on the humorous, as God speaks concerning the land of Babylon, "I will also make it a possession for the hedgehog and swamps of water, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction." (14:23) or Moab, "For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab will be trodden down in his place as straw is trodden down in the water of a manure pile," (25:10) or those who practice merciless destruction, "You have conceived chaff, you will give birth to stubble..." (33:11a)

Sometimes humor echoes with the voice of frustration, as when the prophet Hosea laments over Israel's ongoing rebellion. In 4:16 he declares, "Since Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer, can the Lord now pasture them like a lamb in a large field?" and in 7:8-11a where "Ephraim mixes himself with the nations, Ephraim has become a cake not turned. Strangers devour his strength, yet he does not know it; gray hairs are also sprinkled on him, yet he does not know it. Though the pride of Israel testifies against him, yet they have not returned to the Lord their God, nor have they sought Him for all this. So Ephraim has become like a silly dove, without sense..."

Occasionally, humor goes on the offensive. As in Amos' famous punchline at the end of 1:3-8, in which God promises judgment "for three transgressions and for four" to each of the Northern Kingdom's enemies: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab and even Judah. One can easily imagine his audience being drawn in and becoming more and more receptive until Amos unloads his final pronouncement of condemnation...on Israel herself! His biting sarcasm is nowhere more evident than in his invitation to the rebels found in 4:4-5. "'Enter Bethel and transgress; in Gilgal multiply transgressions! Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer

a thank offering from that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, make them known, for so you love to do, you sons of Israel,' declares the Lord God." Not exactly a Sunday morning altar call! And although his words went unheeded, there is no question as to whether they went unheard, for in 10:12b, we find the rebel prophet Amaziah of Bethel saying to Amos "'Go you seer, flee away to the land of Judah and there eat bread and do your prophesying.'" The humor of this Southerner, who by his own admission was neither "a prophet nor...the son of a prophet," but rather "a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs," had obviously struck a nerve.

When considering the severity of the humorous devices employed on these occasions, an important perspective is offered by Jakob Jónsson in stating, "The prophets use strong words and expressions, and they paint their pictures with striking colours. Consequently the scoffing and sarcasm of the prophet must not be classified as an expression of hatred or lack of sympathy towards the people they are scolding, but just the opposite."²¹

But mere words are not the only instances of humor contained in the Old Testament. Perhaps evidence of the divine sense of humor is also to be found in the God-arranged circumstances surrounding the story of Esther in which the wicked Haman is hung on the gallows erected for Mordecai; or the shark-toothed irony in the recounting of the miserable ends of such villains as Absalom, Ahab, and Jezebel.

As valuable as these Old Testament references are in establishing a precedent for the use of humor in delivering the divine message, perhaps the single most defensible argument to be sought in Scripture relates to whether the incarnate Christ either exhibited

²¹ Jakob Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: Illuminated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash*, (Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, Reykjavík, Poland, 1965), 43.

or employed humor in His own life and ministry. And it is here that perhaps the strongest case can be made.

Once again, there are detractors who would consider even the suggestion of humor in association with the life of Christ as sacrilegious, if not blasphemous. To this line of thinking, Cal Samra very astutely inquires, "But would the multitudes have followed a gloomy Messiah?"²² This observation resonates with both Humphrey Osmond, in writing that "Jesus had an excellent sense of humor and pungent wit. 'If he hadn't, he could not have made such a favorable impression on publicans and sinners, and such an unfavorable impression on the religious establishment,'"²³ and even Jean Leclercq who has posed, "How could Jesus have managed to attract children, women, simple people, if he was always aloof and serious?"²⁴ As verification of this latter, we may also add Mark's own witness that "...the large crowd enjoyed listening to Him." (12:37)

Elton Trueblood has noted that, "The widespread failure to recognize and to appreciate the humor of Christ is one of the most amazing aspects of the era named for Him. Anyone who reads the Synoptic Gospels with a relative freedom from presuppositions might be expected to see that Christ laughed, and that He expected others to laugh, but our capacity to miss this aspect of His life is phenomenal."²⁵ Toward this

²² Cal Samra, *The Joyful Christ*, 8.

²³ Humphrey Osmond, quoted in Tal Bonham, *Humor: God's Gift*, (Broadman Press, Nashville, TN, 1988), 65.

²⁴ Jean Leclercq quoted in Cal Samra, *The Joyful Christ*, 10.

²⁵ Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, (Harper & Row Publishers, New York, NY, 1964), 15.

end, in describing the human nature of Christ, van Rensburg offers, "It is hard to conceive of a Savior devoid of a sense of humor or the ability to laugh, and one would wonder if that would be a salvation for us at all."²⁶

Sadly, one of the factors that complicates, and sometimes precludes, our recognizing Jesus' humor is our own familiarity with the passages in which that humor occurs. Take for example, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus recorded in the third chapter of John's Gospel. In one of the most familiar lines of all Christendom Jesus tells the learned rabbi, "'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" (3:3) to which the literal-minded Nicodemus rejoins "'How can a man be born again when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?'" (3:4) If this exchange had appeared in any other literature than the Bible, we might wonder if perhaps a smile flickered across the aged man's face as Jesus' words conjured up the picture of a delivery in which the expected guest of honor turned out to be an old man instead of a newborn baby! But compounded years of teaching, preaching, theologizing, exegeting, and slogan mongering have virtually assured our inability to see the simple humorous twist in those words "born again." And herein is the tragedy. The words were not intended to be a slogan or a religious catch phrase. They were most likely employed because they would have been a type of humor Nicodemus himself would have recognized. As Henry D. Spalding has observed, "The rabbinic story is calculated to evoke a smile and make one think, but rarely to cause hilarious laughter."²⁷ It is a reasonable presumption that it was this very methodology that

²⁶ Van Rensburg, 41.

²⁷ Spalding, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*, xv.

precipitated the humorous word picture. It is rabbinical humor with a strong twist. Donald Messer has concluded that this was Jesus' particular forte, "The value of this type of speech is that it jars the reader to new awareness or startles the listener to new understandings...Jesus knew the serendipitous art of creating the new by transforming the old. In daring fashion he would creatively appropriate the contradictory or unexpected and reverse religious understandings."²⁸ However, if Nicodemus succeeded in catching Jesus' humor, it is evident that these many years later, we, far too often, do not.

Similar humor in other places, however, is not quite so easy to miss. Perhaps the most familiar illustration is repeated in Matthew 19:23-24 and Mark 10:23-24 and concerns a camel and a needle's eye. Marilyn Meburg adds excellent insight to this passage when she writes:

Is there not tremendous exaggeration as well as delicious humor in the image of a camel huffing and puffing his way through the eye of a needle? . . . To the child-spirit that image flashes on the screen of the mind and amuses and also convicts. Because it is unique, the image becomes unforgettable. But there are those stodgy Bible translators who have tried to explain away this image and say Jesus did not mean the eye of a needle used for sewing; they say he meant a gate in Jerusalem that was so low that a camel could get under it only by tremendous perseverance and a fixed determination. I believe Jesus meant exactly what he said. Jesus had a revolutionary message to give, and that message needed to be communicated in revolutionary as well as unforgettable words and images. The adult mind, so programmed to translate words and experience to the probable and practical, often misses the dramatic and delightful. The British writer Anais Nin says, "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." Jesus used every means possible to alter our perceptions in order that we may see beyond the rigidity of the "as we are."²⁹

²⁸ Donald E. Messer, *Circuit Rider*, Vol. 11 No. 11 (United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN, January 1988), 4.

²⁹ Marilyn Meberg, *Choosing the Amusing: What Difference Does it Make?* (Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1986), 121.

Of particular importance to this discussion, once one acknowledges that Jesus actually employed humor in many of His exchanges, is that a closer examination of His orations indicates that He does not use just one, but, depending upon the situation, several different types of humor. The passages containing the "born again" expression and the camel through the eye of a needle illustration can be grouped under the heading of comic exaggeration and hyperbole according to van Rensburg. He also includes under this heading illustrations of straining gnats while swallowing camels (Matthew 23:24); cleaning the outside of the cup while leaving the inside dirty (Matthew 23:25); and the blind leading the blind (Matthew 15:14). He finds similar imagery in the forgiven man being unforgiving (Matthew 18:28); the dead burying the dead (Matthew 8:22); and cutting off body parts in order to save one's self (recorded in Matthew 5:29-30 and repeated in 18:8-9).

Hyers, on the other hand, groups these first illustrations under the category of irony and satire, to which he adds the images of whitewashing tombs (Matthew 23:27), and honoring past prophets while plotting to kill present ones (Matthew 23:29-37). This position is supported by Trueblood who posits that "...the type of humor found most widely in the Gospels [is] that of irony" and that there are "three particular ways in which Christ's humor is employed, first, in controversy, second, in parables, and third, in short dialogue..." Significantly, he also adds, "Once we realize that Christ was not always engaged in pious talk, we have made an enormous step on the road to understanding."³⁰ Trueblood also includes in this list the imagery of grapes from thorn bushes and figs from

³⁰ Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 10.

thistles (Matthew 7:16); the householder knowing when the thief would break in (Luke 12:39); and from a different source, Nathanael's question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46a). To this collection we might also add the rebukes of Jesus to the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees in such passages as the sounding a trumpet before giving alms (Matthew 6:1-2); the proselyte becoming twice the son of hell as his teacher (Matthew 23:15); and the tax collectors and harlots entering the kingdom before the Pharisees (Matthew 21:31).

Another technique Jesus utilizes is that of comic reversals in parables such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30); the Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19); the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9); the Great Supper (Luke 14:15); and the Widow's mite. Van Rensburg offers that these "comic reversals become a form of comic justice,"³¹ while Earl Palmer offers the insight that in these stories, "the strategy of humor is indirect rather than direct. The humorist creates a story alongside of our story and, by means of the story that comes alongside of our daily life situations, we are indirectly able to see the danger for what it is; the intensity level is reduced by the very indirectness and in the reduction of the terror factor of what we fear most is also reduced."³² Following a similar line, Bryan Adams suggests, "If Jesus had told stories about perfect families and perfect dinner parties, we would despair at the families we have and never dare to entertain at dinner; but in the humor of his parables, we are able to find hope in our own imperfect

³¹ Van Rensburg, 26.

³² Earl F. Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible*, (Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2001), 102.

families and invite others over to eat with us." ³³

In other passages, we find the familiar comedic element of paradox. Van Rensburg identifies it in Jesus' pronouncements concerning the first being last and the last first (Matthew 19:30); losing your life in order to find it (Matthew 10:39); the greatest assuming the place of the youngest, and the leader the servant (Luke 22:26); with its most spectacular appearance in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-26).

On certain occasions, the humor Jesus delivers bares teeth. Nowhere is this more evident than in the tenth chapter of John where, faced with an angry Jewish mob preparing to pelt Him with stones, Jesus offers up the question, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning me?" Moreover, in Luke's gospel, we have the record of Jesus being warned to flee the area because of Herod's desire to kill Him. There is no mistaking the edge in His response, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach my goal.'" (13:32b) In considering these statements, Trueblood has offered that, "The main effort on the part of the contemporary student to confront Christ as actually portrayed rather than as we have imagined Him to be. Only then will we feel the sharpness of His wit. We must do something to liberate our minds from "the spell of familiar and venerated words." ³⁴

³³ Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1997), 12.

³⁴ Trueblood, 19.

It is this notion that offers such a boon to the serious student of Scripture. Difficult passages, such as the exchanges between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman recorded in Matthew 15:21-28 become clearer and appear much more consistent with Jesus' teaching elsewhere if we interpret the dialogue in the light of humor. Trueblood here notes:

We must remember that words are made very different in connotation by the tone of the voice and by the look in the eye of the speaker. There are things we can say with a smile, but which cannot be said, without offense, with a straight face...That Jesus was indulging in this kind of banter about racial and national differences is the only logical alternative to the insufferable hypotheses that He was being intentionally chauvinistic and rude...It is clear that Jesus liked the Gentile woman and responded favorably to her ability to appreciate His real meaning, which was so different from the literal significance of His actual spoken words...*Thus one of the best evidences of Christ's wit is the way in which He responded to the wit of another...*this...form of banter, which is consistent with deep compassion...give[s] us one of the most delightful pictures of our Lord that we possess.³⁵

Understanding the humor of Jesus may also bring a brand new perspective to very familiar passages, such as Adams' interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable:

Those who seek to be truly righteous cannot be the robbers who beat up the victim, nor can they be the priest or the Levite who do not help; and they cannot be the Samaritan for reasons ...already explained. That leaves them as the beaten victim by the side of the road...in relation to the lawyer...His earlier citing of the law and the second question show that he thinks of the neighbor as one he is going to help as part of his earning his way into eternal life; but in Jesus' parable, the neighbor is the one who helps him. So there is a complete reversal of worldview, which can be compared to a shift from salvation by works to salvation by grace.³⁶

It is this resulting understanding and the evident effectiveness of Jesus' humor that has led Palmer to an even more unconventional conclusion:

Jesus of Nazareth is the greatest humorist of all time for three reasons: First, because of the breadth of what He knows about reality. The best humorists always understand what is going on, and better than others do. Secondly, Jesus is good to

³⁵ Ibid, 122, 124, 125.

³⁶ Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree*, 36-37.

the core and the greatest humor has always had its source in the good surprise of grace. St. Paul said it well in his very best and profoundly humorous one line summary of the meaning of the life, death and victory of Jesus: “Where sin increased the grace of God increased more.” (Rom 5)...The third reason will itself take us by surprise. Jesus is the greatest humorist because he is the most *normal* man we have ever met. It is a fact that the best comedy does not come from the strange words of confusion but from the clear-headed words of a clear vision of reality.³⁷

And it is this realization that offers insight to modern-day preachers. If Jesus truly is our best example, then we should consider His approach to humor right along with the rest of His teachings. Perhaps Pascal has said it best, “a king knows how to speak of power, a rich man knows how to speak about wealth, and God knows how to speak about God.”³⁸ Also, if we consider that all these examples of Jesus’ humor appear within a fairly limited context, as Bonham notes, “The New Testament records only thirty-five days of His entire thirty-three years - an average of about one out of every thirty days of His three-year ministry. And, even at that, only fragments of these days are usually chronicled.”³⁹ If we take into account the amount of humor that appears within this relatively small sample of His life, it would then only be reasonable to conclude that humor was very much a part of Jesus’ character and His message as well.

We must exercise caution, however, when noting the difference between the humor Christ employs and that of our current society. As Trueblood writes, “We seek humor for humor’s sake. There seems to be little or none of this in the recorded words of Christ, where the purpose is always the revelation of some facet of truth which would not otherwise be revealed. The humor of Christ is employed, it would appear, only because it

³⁷ Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus*, 25.

³⁸ Pascal quoted in Earl Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus*, 86.

³⁹ Bonham, *Humor: God’s Gift*, 63.

is a means of calling attention to what would, without it, remain hidden or unappreciated. Truth and truth alone, is the end.”⁴⁰

Following His Ascension, one might expect a dramatic lapse of humor in the ongoing saga of the New Testament, as the fledgling church settles itself down to the serious business of carrying the message of the Gospel to the world. Yet even here, in the book of Acts, humor manages to manifest itself. Some comes in the form of recorded orations, such as the beginning of the Apostle Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. After the Holy Spirit's miraculous demonstration of tongues by apostles who are, to this crowd at least, mere "Galileans," it appears that those not so skilful in recognizing foreign languages jumped to a completely different conclusion about what type of 'spirit' was at work. Peter addresses this misconception with the rather humorous statement, "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day." (2:14b-15) The line about being drunk by 9 a.m. may very well have been the first warm-up joke for a sermon ever recorded in the New Testament.

Though perhaps unintended, it is hard to repress a smile at the Apostle Paul's address before the Areopagus, which he begins with "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you." (17:22b-23)

On at least one occasion, the humor actually comes from the opposing side, when in Acts 19:14-16, the seven sons of Sceva summarily botch an exorcism by attempting to

⁴⁰ Trueblood, 43.

use the plagiarized authority of Jesus and Paul. Just before the possessed individual visits a humiliating brutality upon them, he responds to their adjuration with the somewhat comedic phrase, "I recognize Jesus; I know about Paul, but who are you?" (15b) Although the humor of the question would not have been apparent or welcome to those it was directed to, for those of us following after, it is difficult to miss.

Jakob Jónsson has noted that much of "the humor of the Acts is to a great extent the humor of an amusing situation."⁴¹ This can be witnessed in the almost whimsical attributes of Peter's rooftop vision at Joppa in the home of Simon the tanner - for a proper Jew, a virtual stomach-turning array of "four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air" appears, let down from the sky by a large sheet (10:12). This display is followed by an even more revolting command for the visionary to "kill and eat!" (v. 13) One can but imagine Peter's reaction as this gastrointestinal nightmare is repeated twice more before it finally, and thankfully, disappears into the sky.

Reminiscent of the modern day situational comedy is the retelling of this same Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison by an angel in Acts chapter 12. Once again finding himself a free man, the liberated Peter makes his way to the home of John Mark's mother, where a fervent prayer meeting for his release is underway. The humor arrives when Peter raps on the gate and a young maidservant named Rhoda, overjoyed to hear his voice, is so caught up in the moment she forgets to let him in. Instead, she runs inside to report the news, where she is met with the diagnosis that she is either out of her mind or that it is only his angel. It is only sometime later with Peter's incessant knocking that the matter is finally settled and the celebration can begin in earnest.

⁴¹ Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, 222.

In a minor key, perhaps there is even grim humor to be found in the turn of events resulting in the death of Peter's persecutor, Herod Agrippa. In recounting the story, Luke is careful to note that this king who has without blushing received the praise of men for an oration that was, "The voice of a god and not a man," (12:22*b*) meets an end as far removed from divinity as plausible when he is consumed by worms.

And then, there are the Epistles. Some have accused their primary contributor, the Apostle Paul, of lacking the sense of humor his Master employed. However, the evidence would suggest otherwise. Paul is a master wordsmith, and much of his humor is bound up in puns and plays upon words. On other occasions, one may catch glimpses of his humor in the rabbinical method of pushing arguments to their inevitable conclusion. This is nowhere more evident than in his masterwork of Romans, where his argument for salvation by grace through faith is repeatedly punctuated by a rehearsal of untenable conclusions answered by the recurring refrain, **Μὴ-γένοιτο**, "*Meyenoito!*" - May it never be!" (3:3-4, 5-6, 31; 6:1-2, 15; 7:7, 13, 9:14; 11:1, 11)

Some of Paul's more overt humor is reserved for his correspondence with the church at Corinth. As Jónsson has offered, "Paul displays his humorous gifts especially in writing to the Corinthians, because their problems resulted from taking themselves too seriously."⁴² This seriousness is a result of a misguided belief that they are spiritually mature, wise, and superior. Yet it is to them Paul addresses such comedic gems as "I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able." (1 Corinthians 3:2) It is also to this audience that Paul

⁴² Ibid, 79.

addresses six different warnings against becoming **φυσιώω**, “*phusioo*,” rendered, “arrogant” but meaning literally, “puffed up.”

Centuries later, Paul’s rejoinders still ring with authority, but also with a biting sarcasm, and occasionally, a not so thinly veiled frustration, as in his pronouncements concerning their abuse of the agape feasts and the Lord’s Supper in 11:22, “What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.”

Many of Paul’s images and illustrations also ring with humor. This is evident in both his shadowboxing allusion in 1 Corinthians 10:26 and his improvised conversation among body parts in 12:15-21. There is even a strong indication of humor in the methodology he chooses for his series of questions in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, where Adams points out that “Paul piles twenty questions one on top of the other and frames them so the answer to each one is different from the one before. That strategy confuses the listener, for an audience expects the same answer to each question, as is usual discourse to build group cohesion.”⁴³ Group cohesion, one might recall, was not exactly a strong suit of the Corinthian church.

Indications may also be drawn from what Adams refers to as Paul’s “anti-autobiography” presented in 2 Corinthians 11:1-12:10,⁴⁴ where instead of highlighting his strengths, Paul gives a roll call of his weaknesses. Other passages include his Philippians 3:8 statement in which he relates that he has “suffered the loss of all things,

⁴³ Adams, 86-87.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 80.

and count[s] them but rubbish in order that [he] may gain Christ.” The “rubbish” here translated is actually σκύβαλα, “*skubala*” - that which occasionally issues from the south end of a north going donkey. Other humorous touches may be found in his use of the term “busybodies” in 2 Thessalonians 3:11 and 1 Timothy 5:13, and warnings against those who would “captivate weak women” in 2 Timothy 3:6. There is also what has been referred to by some as the “bloody joke” of Galatians 5:12, “I wish those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves,” since Paul’s reference is to those championing the cause of circumcision. In a similar vein, perhaps his most obvious use of humor is found in 1 Corinthians 7:18a where he gives the pronouncement “Was any man called already circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised.” One can only ponder how such a thing could possibly occur.

And Paul is not the only New Testament writer to display a sense of humor. Even James, whose Epistle’s emphasis on good works has sometimes won him the unmerited reputation as an overly somber soul, shows traces of humor beneath his allegedly crusty exterior. It peeks at us in his reference to the man looking in a mirror and then immediately forgetting “what kind of person he was” in 1:23-24, and in his description of the human tongue as “the very world of iniquity” which “No one can tame” for it “is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.” (v. 8) Hyperbole yes, but with decidedly comic undertones.

Taken in sum, there is adequate scriptural evidence to indicate that the use of humor in proclaiming the message of God has its roots in the Divine and its practitioners in every age. Humor, at least that kind of humor that serves to capture the ear and heart of human beings for the express purpose of circumventing their defenses and improving

their receptivity to a spiritual message, has been sanctioned both in theory and in practice by the Lord Himself and those emissaries commissioned to deliver His message. Its efficacy and appropriateness for messengers of our own day would seem then assured provided its use is subjugated to the ultimate import of the message itself, and the particular style of humor employed tailored to the individual audience and their unique circumstances. Its highest, best purpose is, as Cicero has suggested, “Joke with good reason, not to appear jesters, but to obtain some advantage.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Cicero, quoted in Tal Bonham, *Humor: God's Gift*, 201.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Once we arrive at the conclusion that humor can be a legitimate component in the art of communicating the message of God, the question that naturally follows is ‘How?’ How can this powerful tool be utilized to its fullest potential by those engaged in bringing the message of the gospel to humankind? One of the more unique aspects of an examination of this subject is the relative paucity of scholarly writings when compared to the various other dynamics of the preaching experience. One is reminded of Cal Samra’s observation that, “Considering the fact that Christians have been raised to celebrate a ‘Merry Christmas’ and a ‘Happy Easter,’ I have always wondered why Christian humorist-writers are as rare as desert penguins.”⁴³

It is a valid point. However, if one takes into consideration the relative unease this subject tends to generate among the hyper-reverent, this lack of text should come as little or no surprise. There are any number of more ‘religiously acceptable’ subjects that one’s time and energies might be devoted to. But what is surprising is that a similar scarcity appears to exist among more secular works as well.

There is no shortage of comic writing, to be sure, although it seems to wear something of a scarlet letter among the uninitiated. “When you do comedy,” Woody Allen once said, “you are not sitting at the grownups’ table.”⁴⁴ And yet this sentiment

⁴³ Samra, 5.

⁴⁴ Woody Allen, quoted by Mordecai Richler, ed., in *The Best of Modern Humor*, (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY 1983), xiv.

does not exactly square with associated research on the subject. “One investigator administered tests to professional humorists and discovered their average I.Q. was 138, which would put them in the highest 2 percent of the population. A further study revealed that the writers of humor had even higher I.Q.’s, these humorists were hardly fools in the intellectual realm.”⁴⁵ These results notwithstanding, Dorothy Parker has observed that, “It is a strange force that compels a writer to be a humorist. The world is stacked against him...You can play percentage baseball, paint by numbers, even raise your children according to Dr. Spock, but there are no guidelines for writing good humor.”⁴⁶ It appears that British actor Edmund Gwenn was correct, when on his deathbed he remarked, “Dying is easy. Comedy is difficult.”⁴⁷

On this subject, Mordecai Richler is succinct, “The truth is, there is no explaining how it’s done; and only a foolish practitioner would dare to take his own machine apart - he might never be able to put it back together again.”⁴⁸ This sentiment is reminiscent of E. B. White’s famous line, “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.”⁴⁹

But if there exists a deficiency of ink addressing the “how to’s” of creating humor, no such shortage exists in the estimation of its value in human communication.

⁴⁵ John W. Drakeford, *Humor in Preaching*, (Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Mi, 1986), 11-12.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Parker, quoted by Mordecai Richler, ed., in *The Best of Modern Humor*, xv.

⁴⁷ Edmund Gwenn, quoted in *Time* magazine, January 1984, 30.

⁴⁸ Mordecai Richler, *the Best of Modern Humor*, xviii.

⁴⁹ E. B. White, quoted by Robert Byrne in *The 2,548 Best Things Anybody Ever Said*, (Galahad Books, New York, NY, 1996), 557.

Practically every volume addressing the subject pays homage to humor in some way, although the extent and degree vary widely.

Some of its strongest proponents are today's household names. From the concise observation of such literary legends as Mark Twain, "Against the assault of humor, nothing can stand"; ⁵⁰ and George Bernard Shaw, "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, or they will kill you"; ⁵¹ to such modern icons as the inimitable Theodore Geisler (aka 'Dr. Seuss'), "Humor has a tremendous place in a sordid world. It's more than just a laughing matter. If you can see things out of whack then you can see how things can be in whack," ⁵² likewise Larry King, "Unless you're announcing a cure for cancer or declaring war, it helps to remember that speeches are considered by some to be the curse of mankind. Don't *stay* serious if you don't have to. And even if you're talking on a serious subject, most listeners will welcome a shot of humor." ⁵³

This broad appeal stems, in part, from the universal appeal of humor. One might presume that this would go without saying when you consider that "someone once figured out it takes seventy-two muscles to frown, and only fifteen to smile." ⁵⁴ On this subject, Canadian humorist and economist, Stephen Leacock is quoted as saying,

⁵⁰ Mark Twain, quoted by Cal Samra in *The Joyful Christ: The Healing Power of Humor*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 9.

⁵¹ George Bernard Shaw, quoted in Tal Bonham, *Humor: God's Gift*, 269.

⁵² Theodore S. Geisel (Dr. Seuss), *Readers Digest*, April 1984, p. 62.

⁵³ Larry King with Bill Gilbert, *How to Talk to Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere: The Secrets of Good Communication*, (Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, NY, 1994), 179.

⁵⁴ Samra, 21.

A peculiar interest always attaches itself to humor. There is no quality of the human mind about which its possessor is more sensitive than the sense of humor. A man will freely confess he has no ear for music, or no taste for fiction, or even no interest in religion. But I have yet to see the man who announces he has no sense of humor. In point of fact, every man is apt to think himself possessed of an exceptional gift in this direction.⁵⁵

In spite of the accuracy of this assessment, Peter Burger here offers a word of caution in that “Humor - that is, the capacity to perceive something as being funny - is universal; there has been no human culture without it. It can safely be regarded as a necessary constituent of humanity. At the same time, what strikes people as funny and what they do in order to provoke a human response differs enormously from age to age, and from society to society. Put differently, humor is an anthropological constant *and* is historically relative.”⁵⁶

The virtues of humor are many. Phoenix psychotherapist, John McBride, has stated that,

Laughter is God’s hand on the shoulder of a troubled world. This would be a bleak and dreary world without humor. The ability to laugh at ourselves is the next greatest gift we have to love. The cut-and-dried scientific approach to human life is one of the major catastrophes of today. When we take away the ability to laugh with chemicals, we destroy an important aspect of humankind. The first symptom of the emotionally ill person is his lack of laughter. I believe we have to celebrate life with laughter.⁵⁷

Gordon Allport finds humor’s primary contribution in terms of offering perspective.

⁵⁵ Stephen Leacock, quoted in Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*, (Holt Publishing, New York, NY, 1937), 224

⁵⁶ Peter L. Burger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, (Walter De Gruyter & Co., Berlin, 1997), 10.

⁵⁷ John McBride, quoted in Samra, 22.

Humor in one respect...is like religion. By setting up a frame of reference that is at variance with the ordinary mundane frame of reference, both have the peculiar ability of precipitating the ordinary worries and mischances of life into new and sane patterns. Humor, like religion, shatters the rigidity of literal mindedness. To view one's problems humorously is to see them as trivial and of no consequence, to view them religiously is to see them in relation to a divine scheme that gives them changed meaning. In humor all things are not all earnest or purposive, but pompous and out of step; in religion there is no such thing as incongruity. Thus setting up novel standards, both religion and humor, albeit in different ways, bring perspective.⁵⁸

Earl Palmer, in his book *The Humor of Jesus*, offers that "Healthy humor connects human beings and creates self-understanding."⁵⁹ It also, "...levels the ground between the kinds of power that people make use of to find their way and get their way... But best of all we need to laugh because life is exciting and the source of happiness is as joyous as it is serious."⁶⁰

Contributors to the Harvard Business Review have similarly outlined several benefits in the area of communication, Michael McCaskey for instance, "Joking is one of the few ways managers permit risky statements to be made. American managers especially allow each other greater leeway in delivering a hard truth if it is packaged as part of a joke."⁶¹

The consulting team of Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois III also add that,

⁵⁸ Gordon W. Allport, *Personality*, 225.

⁵⁹ Palmer, 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 24.

⁶¹ Michael B. McCaskey, "The Hidden Messages Managers Send," [11-12/1979] from *Harvard Business Review on Effective Communication*, (Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 1999), 124.

Humor works as a defense mechanism to protect people from the stressful and threatening situations that commonly arise in the course of making strategic decisions. It helps people distance themselves psychologically by putting those situations into a broader life context, often through the use of irony. Humor - with its ambiguity - can also blunt the threatening edge of negative information. Speakers can say things in jest that might otherwise give offense because the message is simultaneously serious and not serious. The recipient is allowed to save face by receiving the serious message while appearing not to do so. The result is communication of difficult information in a more tactful and less personally threatening way.

Humor can also move decision making into a collaborative rather than competitive frame through its powerful effect on mood. According to a large body of research, people in a positive mood tend to be not only more optimistic but also more forgiving of others and creative in seeking solutions. A positive mood triggers a more accurate perception of others' arguments because people in a good mood tend to relax their defensive barriers and so can listen more effectively.⁶²

This effect on listening (and subsequently retention) is one of the most important elements in considering the worth of humor in communication, particularly in light of specialized research.

For several years we have been testing the ability of people to understand and remember what they hear. At the University of Minnesota we examined the listening ability of several thousand students and of hundreds of business and professional people. In each case the person tested listened to short talks by faculty members and was examined for his grasp of the content.

These extensive tests led us to this general conclusion: immediately after the average person has listened to someone talk, he remembers only about half of what he has heard - no matter how carefully he thought he was listening.

What happens as time passes? Our own testing shows - and it has been substantiated by reports of research at Florida State University and Michigan State University - that two months after listening to a talk, the average listener will remember only about 25% of what was said. In fact, after we have barely learned something, we tend to forget from one-half to one-third of it *within eight hours*; it is startling to realize that frequently we forget more in this first short interval than we do in the next six months.⁶³

⁶² Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight" [07-08/1997] from *Harvard Business Review on Effective Communication*, 183-184.

⁶³ Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens, "Listening to People," [09-10/1957] from *Harvard Business Review on Effective Communication*, 3.

This dramatic loss in the retention of communicated information is a serious matter. Fortunately, it is here the contributions of humor in preaching may be most important. Psychologist John Drakeford offers that:

Some studies have shown that humor can enhance learning and creativity and may be a factor in improving memory. The theory is that humor is tied in with an individual's capacity to pay attention. First humor captures a student's attention by 'tickling his curiosity' about the subject; it frees up attention by releasing stress that might have distracted; and it holds attention by providing motivation and momentum. All this in turn leads to retention. Humor may ultimately turn out to be the royal road to learning.⁶⁴

A similar take is offered by Stuart Briscoe, "Humor allows the mental equivalent of a seventh inning stretch. People's minds need a break now and then, and humor can supply it in a way that enhances the sermon. After momentary laughter, people are ready for more content."⁶⁵ In similar fashion, Bonham has noted that the use of humor not only "enhances our memory" but also "removes barriers caused by gaps in age, education, background, experience, and other factors."⁶⁶

When considering the inherent consequence of proclaiming the word of God, this makes the use of humor of particular importance in preaching. Bert Decker and Hershael York in their book *Speaking With Bold Assurance* opine:

Humor creates a special bond between you and your listeners. It's virtually impossible to dislike someone who makes us laugh, who helps us enjoy ourselves. We are able to accept tough truths and even correction when they are presented with a light touch. We not only tend to like to be around people with a sense of humor

⁶⁴ Drakeford, *Humor in Preaching*, 12.

⁶⁵ Stuart Briscoe, "Filling the Sermon with Interest," from *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, Stuart Briscoe, Bill Hybels, and Haddon Robinson, ([*Christianity Today*], Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1989), 72.

⁶⁶ Bonham, 186, 189.

who can laugh at themselves and the world around them, we tend to trust them more than the grim and serious. A sense of humor – whether sharp and explosive or dry and witty - makes you appear more genial, warmer, and more likable. And the strong, pleasurable emotions people associate with good fun and high spirits make your message enjoyable to listen to - and memorable.⁶⁷

Memorability is certainly a major goal of the preaching event, but humor can also contribute significantly by its innate ability to overcome many of the barriers present in a given preaching situation. Drakeford again notes that “One of the most effective ways of overcoming hostility and building relationships in our day is the use of humor, and it has a place at every stage of the sermon.”⁶⁸ This capacity of humor to operate at multiple levels simultaneously is evident in Duane Litfin’s observation that, “In a broader sense, every speech ought to be entertaining...” the result being that “We do not have to labor to stay tuned...What we need to see is that in this broader sense the purpose to ‘entertain’ does not supplant the other major purposes which a speech may have; *it complements them.*”⁶⁹

Bill Hybels too, offers that although humor is:

...one of the toughest parts of sermon preparation. As long as it’s used appropriately, its importance when preaching can hardly be overemphasized. Some people come to church not expecting to find themselves enjoying the experience. If I can get them laughing, they relax and become more open to what I’m about to say . . . with all that pain and guilt and sin-talking floating in the air, with people feeling nervous or perhaps expecting to be offended, anything I can say that disarms

⁶⁷ Bert Decker and Hershael W. York, *Speaking with Bold Assurance: How to Become a Persuasive Communicator*, (Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 2001), 92.

⁶⁸ Drakeford, 30.

⁶⁹ Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992), 141.

them for a moment is precious.⁷⁰

Hyers, in his insightful book, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith* makes similar observations, “Humor is a subtle weapon, a two-edged sword that cuts through many defenses and makes the heart vulnerable to its good intent - the word of God.”⁷¹ He further offers that “the work of the Spirit is to refine the gift of humor, redeeming it from its fallen state and quickening it to its proper role in the believer’s life.”⁷² And on a more pragmatic note, “We need to keep the comic spirit in theology as a safety valve from our own seriousness, for a faith without humor can become a relentless form of unmerciful dogmatism.”⁷³

W. H. Mullen examines the implications: “It has recently been revealed that whereas we have a gospel for the alienated, the hurt, the depressed, the defeated, we have not a gospel for the well, the joyous, the busy, the engaged people of this world...it is more and more widely true that a gospel whose scope does not address people in their joyous, creative, constructive and effectual operations is unchallenging because uninteresting.”⁷⁴ This sentiment certainly resonates with Hyers, who contends that “The

⁷⁰ Bill Hybels, “Sex: Preaching that Oh-So-Delicate Subject” from *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, Christianity Today, Inc., Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1989), 95.

⁷¹ Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, (The Pilgrim Press, New York, NY, 1981), 30.

⁷² Ibid, 42.

⁷³ Ibid, 43.

⁷⁴ W. H. Mullen, “Toward a Theology of Humor (with Response by Dr. Anderson)” in *Christian Scholars Review* 3, no. 1, (1973), 4.

fall of Adam was a fall into seriousness. And we have taken ourselves, our circumstances, our achievements, and our beliefs quite seriously ever since.”⁷⁵

It is this “fall into seriousness” that offers one of the great hindrances to proclamation. Sadly, it is quite prevalent among the believing community, as Samra in his book *The Joyful Christ* states, “Humor is a gift to the church, but there are people in all churches who would discourage and suppress it....Some Christians (of all denominations) have taken pride in their long-faced gloominess, and their relentless melancholia has driven a lot of potential converts away, much to the great glee of the Devil.”⁷⁶ In addition, “Humor reminds us of our fragility, our weakness, our humanity. It teaches us not to take ourselves too seriously. It helps us learn humility. Humor is threatening only to the proud, the self-righteous, and the pharisaical, who even today are inclined to crucify people who express joy and wit.”⁷⁷

This ‘anti-humor’ sentiment has been around for some time. In colonial America, the Puritans received the brunt of the criticism on this point, and not without some justification. H. L. Mencken, for instance, humorously defined Puritanism as “that haunting feeling that somewhere, some place, somebody is happy.”⁷⁸ But the reason behind such feelings may be much more involved than simple denominational predilections, “Clinical psychologists have long perceived the intimate relation between compassion and humor; and it appears that the greater the capacity for the one quality, the

⁷⁵ Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, 23.

⁷⁶ Samra, 5.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁷⁸ H. L. Mencken quoted in Samra, *The Joyful Christ*, 132.

greater the capacity for the other.”⁷⁹ As Hyers has shared, “Without humor we become something less, not more, than human. We become not more divine but more demonic,”⁸⁰ a sentiment that rings true with Palmer when he writes that, “Hell is the really serious place because there is nothing there to laugh at.”⁸¹

Beyond these considerations, there is also a generous amount of scholarship devoted to how humor works, although on this particular point, there is a divergence of opinions. In Edward Greenstein’s *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on ‘Humor and Wit’ three factors are catalogued which “together occasion humor: a sense of the incongruous, a relaxed, or lighthearted mood, and an effect of suddenness or surprise.”⁸² F. Scott Spencer modifies these three and adds four more:

Incongruity - Humor arises in the ironic cracks of a narrative where something doesn’t fit conventional expectations of how life works.

Festivity - which includes not only the amusement of eating and drinking stressed by Greenstein, but also the familiar climax of the happy ending.

Spontaneity - the presentation of some incongruous, joyous bit of news in a strikingly sudden, unexpected fashion.

Ingenuity - We are typically diverted by witty speech or clever schemes played out in a story.

Inferiority, the flip-side of the so-called ‘superiority theory’ of humor advanced by thinkers from Plato to Hobbes to Freud

Elasticity - Henri Bergson’s interesting notion...Bergson theorizes that we especially laugh at people who are trapped in a box of “*mechanical elasticity*, just where we would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.”

⁷⁹ Hyers, *Vision*, 40.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

⁸¹ Palmer, 119.

⁸² E. L. Greenstein, “Humor and Wit: Old Testament’, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. III, ed. David Noel Freeman, (Doubleday Publishing, New York, NY, 1992), 330.

Imperceptibility - or hiddenness.⁸³

From a more historical context, Tal Bonham, in his book - *Humor: God's Gift* analyzes three classic theories:

- (1) *The Superiority Theory*. Plato surmised that laughter is an expression of one's feeling of superiority over someone else. "The laughable person is one who thinks himself wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is." Aristotle, agreeing with Plato, taught that laughter is basically a form of derision.
- (2) *The Incongruity Theory*. Immanuel Kant is generally considered the father of the incongruity theory of humor. It contends that humor is derived from the unexpected or illogical. Thus humor is based on the assumption that we do live in an orderly universe.
- (3) *The Relief Theory*. Some suggest that laughter is the release of psychic energy in an effort to escape from reason or prohibitions...Sigmund Freud contended that we all store up psychic energy that is not needed. This surplus energy is discharged as laughter.⁸⁴

Earl Palmer in his book *The Humor of Jesus* catalogues at least seven different forms that humor takes:

- (1) The most common...is the surprise of initial confusion or misinformation which, when it is later clarified, the humor in it breaks in upon us.
- (2) Human frailty find[ing] its linkage to the fears of normal people.
- (3) The surprise of grace when the laughter comes from the discovery of something so good it takes us by surprise.
- (4) The humor of justice which occupies a very major part in every adventure story.
- (5) Ironical humor...the surprise of laughter that comes because things are not as they appear to be.
- (6) The simplest of all forms of humor, the dual surprises of the interruption by the unexpected, and its opposite,
- (7) the persistence of repetition.⁸⁵

⁸³ F. Scott Spencer, "Those Riotous - Yet Righteous - Foremothers of Jesus: Exploring Matthew's Comic Genealogy," in *Are We Amused?: Humor About Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (T&T Clark International, New York, NY, 2002), 10-12.

⁸⁴ Bonham, 19, 20.

⁸⁵ Palmer, 16, 17, 18.

He also relates that “The humor of the unexpected discovery of incongruity is the most common cause of laughter.”⁸⁶

We may also expand on Henri Bergson’s assertions mentioned previously, “The attitudes, gestures and movements of a human body are laughable in exact proportion as the body reminds us of a mere machine...We laugh every time a person gives the impression of being a thing...Rigidity is the comic and laughter is the corrective.”⁸⁷

Arthur Koestler “finds the essence of laughter in what he terms bisociation. By this term he means the association of two normally non-related ideas that are brought together in an unexpected and unanticipated manner and given a logical intersection point. The humorist joins two normally incompatible matrices together and his audience...has its expectations shattered and its reason affronted by the impact of the second matrix on the first; instead of fissure there is collision, and in the mental disarray which ensues, emotion, deserted by reason, is flushed out in laughter.”⁸⁸ Such humor is evidenced by such tongue-in-cheek adages as, “Never teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and annoys the pig.”

In addition to the psychological dimensions, the advances of modern science have also provided an opportunity for scientists to explore the chemical and physiological elements that account for the humor response. Raymond Moody in his book, *Laugh After Laugh: The Healing Power of Humor*, offers up the following scenario: “laughter

⁸⁶ Ibid, 41.

⁸⁷ Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” from *An Essay on Comedy*, Wylie Sypher, ed. (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1956), 74.

⁸⁸ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, (The McMillan Company, New York, NY, 1964), 35.

stimulates the brain to produce the alertness hormone, catecholamine – a complex substance that contains epinephrine, norepinephrine, and dopamine and enables us to respond physically to emergencies. In turn, the arousal hormone stimulates the release of endorphins – the body’s natural painkillers. As the brain’s level of endorphins increases, the perception of pain decreases. Laughter, then, causes the body to produce its own painkiller.”⁸⁹

This conclusion is supported by the investigations of William Fry, who after “extensive research concluded that laughter stimulates the production of catecholamine, a hormone scientists have associated with alertness, and makes the laughing person more responsive.”⁹⁰ Based on this, Drakeford has surmised that “the preacher who uses humor will discover he has an ally in the hormone, which the laughing listener is producing by his own response.”⁹¹

In addition to the human chemistry involved, there is also substantial agreement as to the do’s and don’ts of humor usage. Particularly worthy of remembering are a pair of Bonham’s proverbs, “The success of humor lies in the ear of him who hears it – never in the tongue of him who makes it,” and “Wit is the salt of the speech, not the food.”⁹² In this regard, Falstaff’s old adage that ‘discretion is the better part of valor’ certainly comes into play where humor in communication is concerned, particularly with its use in

⁸⁹ Raymond Moody, quoted in Marilyn Meberg, *Choosing the Amusing*, 37.

⁹⁰ Drakeford, 55.

⁹¹ Ibid, 56.

⁹² Bonham, 200.

an introduction.

Lawrence Peter and Bill Dana suggest that humor “be used in the introduction only if it is relevant to the topic and if the speaker can provide a transition from the joke or story into the subject at hand.”⁹³ To this Bonham also adds a word of warning, “The use of humor can be delightful or dangerous in an introduction. Nothing can warm up an audience faster than laughter. However, nothing can turn them off quite as fast as an unsuccessful attempt to be funny. They will not forget their first impression, and they will remember very little of what you say thereafter.”⁹⁴ Even veterans like Jerry Lewis caution against overuse, “You have to let people rest after a good laugh, give them time to calm down and prepare for the next laugh.”⁹⁵

If this is true in relation to speech and comedy, it is even more so in the context of preaching, as Drakeford points out:

Having said all these things about the value of humor, I suggest that it is important to remember that a Preacher can become too interested in humor, miss the point of his calling, and sink to the role of a jester. Earlier we discussed the Humor Attitude and noted that an attitude can be likened to a sausage machine. No matter What materials were inserted at one end, it all comes out sausage at the other. A preacher who becomes obsessed with being funny loses his ability to communicate the gospel in all its seriousness. It all comes out as nonsense.⁹⁶

As Stuart Briscoe cautions, “Humor can be a wonderful servant or a dreadful

⁹³ Ibid, 197.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 197.

⁹⁵ Jerry Lewis, quoted in Drakeford, 89.

⁹⁶ Drakeford, 93.

master.”⁹⁷ Bonham adds a similar admonition, “Of all people, the minister must be on guard for the overuse of humor. People come to church not to hear a clerical jester, but to hear a word from the Lord. Only when God’s Word can be clarified and better communicated through humor should humor be used in the pulpit.”⁹⁸

Expanding on this caveat, Palmer adds,

There are those who could argue that the use of humor has the same potential danger as parables in suggesting possible misunderstanding of the seriousness of our discipleship mandate. Humor has a softening effect as we have already observed; and it is logical to ask if that softening caused by laughter is a wise strategy for fighters in a war, or disciples on a mission to oppose the works of darkness of this age. How does humor fit with the necessary sobriety and watchfulness that a disciple needs to exhibit in order to live out the apostolic mandate in the real world of persecution and evil?

These questions...go to the core of the purpose and meanings of humor. Is humor an add on, a nonessential ingredient that accompanies the reality core, or is it in some remarkable way a part of the mixture of the reality core itself?⁹⁹

Palmer’s conclusion is significant. He finds, “The humor of Jesus is an ally of joy and therefore joy is not an extraneous add-on to greater realities. There are no greater realities.”¹⁰⁰

The key concept behind these observations is that humor employed in communication (particularly of a religious nature) must be part and parcel of the message being communicated, not some disconnected appendage. Haddon Robinson has noted, “A story told for its own sake may entertain or amuse an audience, but it gets in the way

⁹⁷ Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, 72.

⁹⁸ Bonham, 202-203.

⁹⁹ Palmer, 116.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 119.

of your sermon. An anecdote works in the service of truth only when it centers attention on the idea and not on itself.”¹⁰¹

Decker and York are likewise emphatic, they counsel, “First and surprisingly...don’t tell jokes! Leave comedy to the comedians...If your joke falls flat, you’ll go down with it. Everyone in the room feels uncomfortable and embarrassed when a speaker’s joke does the old lead balloon....Second, understand that fun is better than funny. Your goal is not comedy but connection - creating an atmosphere of fun, friendliness, and openness.”¹⁰²

This connection, King shares, is extremely important as he offers that “The audience responds to this approach for two reasons:

1. It’s funny.
2. It makes a point that connects with their own experience.”¹⁰³

Brody and Kent expand this concept and offer some concise suggestions, “Humor is an age-old device for establishing rapport with the audience through the bond of shared human experience. The key criterion for using humor is to make sure you are comfortable with it, it is in good taste, it is relevant to your speech, and it is funny.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 155.

¹⁰² Decker and York, *Speaking with Bold Assurance*, 94.

¹⁰³ King, *How to Talk to Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere*, 181.

¹⁰⁴ Marjorie Brody and Shawn Kent, *Power Presentations: How to Connect with Your Audience and Sell Your Ideas*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, NY, 1993), 92.

Employed effectively, Robinson notes that there is “an added benefit of humor: while it is hard to engage the emotions of a congregation, once you engage any emotion (humor, suspense, grief), it’s relatively easy to enlist the others.”¹⁰⁵

Many writers have addressed the practical mechanics of this subject, including Drakeford, “No matter how good the content of the story, it must be delivered properly or it will be one of those fizzles that sometimes bedevil even the most effective speaker. There are at least five elements to...successful delivery: wear an appropriate expression, catch the attention, establish the background, create an expectation, and provide frustration and surprise.”¹⁰⁶

Addressing the same subject, Bonham offers up six other simple suggestions,

1. Know your audience.
2. Realize that some people are humor insulated.
3. Be natural.
4. Let humor aid communication without calling attention to itself.
5. Don’t be offensive.
6. Don’t overdo it.¹⁰⁷

Brody and Kent offer up similar strategies, specifically in regard to telling a humorous story:

To use humor effectively...you have to feel comfortable. Practice to perfect your timing so that you can sound like you are speaking off the cuff. How do you judge what is humorous and worth using? Here are four criteria:

1. *You Have to Remember the Punch Line.* Many a speaker has been eager to relate a good story only to forget the punch line. Few stories can stand on their

¹⁰⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, “Bringing Yourself into the Pulpit,” in Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, 134.

¹⁰⁶ Drakeford, 81.

¹⁰⁷ Bonham, 200, 201, 202.

own. If you forget the punch line, the audience is likely to either doubt your credibility or feel sorry for you (or both). Neither response is desirable.

2. *The Story Relates to the Subject of Your Speech.* If your audience is composed of spouses of disabled people and you are speaking about how to build a network of support, an anecdote about football is probably inappropriate.

3. *Your Timing Is Good.* Practice your anecdote. Tell it to several different people and watch their reactions. Practice until you feel comfortable.

4. *Most Importantly, Tell a Story That Is at No One's Expense.* You might think a joke about an overweight woman is OK because your audience is all male, and you don't see any obese persons in the room. Wrong! You don't know who the members of your audience live with or what their values are; *any time you put down or offend someone in any way, even in a humorous way, it is not funny.*" ¹⁰⁸

This last point bears some expansion, Robinson shares, "A preacher who can laugh in the pulpit has a tremendous advantage, but humor can be dangerous... Some humor puts people down, and even though the putdown is funny and the audience laughs, the preacher comes across, on a subconscious level, as somewhat unkind. And that works against a speaker." ¹⁰⁹

One of the major challenges in using humor comes in finding sources. Often the best source might be closer than you think. As King notes, "The best humor comes from your personal experiences, when you can laugh at yourself and share it with others. Although you don't want to deprecate yourself, you do want to show that you are human." ¹¹⁰ Decker and York advise, "Think funny, and you will begin to not only see the humor around you, but you will begin to use humor in communication. Look for the humor in the serious - it's almost always there." ¹¹¹ This is particularly true of a

¹⁰⁸ Brody and Kent, *Power Presentations*, 44-45.

¹⁰⁹ Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, 134.

¹¹⁰ King, 44-45.

¹¹¹ Decker and York, 94.

sermon text. Conrad Hyers has observed that in the pages of the Bible, “The whole range of the comic - from gentle humor to biting satire - is employed. To appreciate this is to receive the gift of laughter and share in the humor of God.”¹¹²

Another important consideration to keep in mind is that “...humor, like anything else, doesn’t work if it’s forced...Whatever your style of humor is, let it come into the conversation naturally.”¹¹³ Timing is another critical element, here again, Bonham suggests, “Within the body of the presentation, humor can often be used to strengthen the theme and the main idea you are attempting to communicate. Humor may also call your audience back to the subject of your presentation...Humor can also be effectively used at the conclusion of a presentation. The audience’s last impression of you is often the longest remembered.”¹¹⁴

One should also consider that “Humor at your own expense, if not used too often, can be a way of getting people to respond. We love people who laugh at themselves, because they are saying, ‘What I’m talking about is very serious, but I don’t take myself too seriously.’”¹¹⁵

In his book, *Preaching*, Fred Craddock offers up an excellent summary of the value of humor in preaching:

Humor properly joined to the matter of the sermon, feels at home and is thus free to frolic, laugh, and celebrate the grace of God. Humor is, after all, inevitable

¹¹² Hyers, *Vision*, 6.

¹¹³ King, 86, 88.

¹¹⁴ Bonham, 97-98.

¹¹⁵ Robinson, Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, 134.

in truly good preaching, because all the right ingredients are present: concrete specific references, no one laughs at the general and abstract . . . Humor is, then, a genuine response to grace; grace works in us that most beautiful virtue, gratitude; and the grateful person acknowledges that there is usually a small party going on in the back of his mind. All this, of course, makes no sense to the humorless calculator who carefully inserts a joke here and there to break up the monotony of a sermon which, in its intense effort to be totally serious, generates smiles and muffled laughter.¹¹⁶

To this, we add Bonham's classic observation that "The Bible, which is inspired by God, is primarily a message to be communicated,"¹¹⁷ and couple it with Richler's statement that "Humor, after all, is a very serious business – as a rule, the easier it looks, the harder it came."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1985), 219.

¹¹⁷ Bonham, 28.

¹¹⁸ Richler, xv.

CHAPTER 4

REAL LIFE APPLICATIONS OF HUMOR IN PREACHING

As enlightening and necessary as discovering the foundational issues for the use of humor in preaching may be, these pale in importance to acquiring an understanding of the ways in which humor can be used in real-life applications. Generally speaking, there are four primary means by which humor can be introduced into a sermon.

One of the most common methods occurs when a preacher employs what we will term here as *transplanted* or *borrowed humor*, although *hijacked humor* might be the more appropriate term. The speaker employs secular humor directly; hearing a funny story or anecdote, perhaps even a one-liner, from some source - a book, television program, friend, movie, commercial, radio, the ever-present internet, or the like, and interjecting it into a sermon they are preparing. This process generally falls into one of two categories. The first is the more common. A funny story is used as an opener for a sermon. It may or may not have anything to do with the subject of the sermon, but is utilized as a perfunctory object in an effort to 'loosen up' the audience.

Such an 'opener' might run something like this:

An old preacher was dying. He sent a message for his doctor and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home. When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit, one on each side of his bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling.

For a time, no one said anything. Both the doctor and lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, uncomfortable sermons about greed, covetousness and avaricious behavior that made them squirm in their seats.

Finally, the doctor said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?"
The old preacher mustered up his strength, then said weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves; and that's how I want to go too."

It is an excellent anecdote, to be sure, and, with the possible exception of a few hypersensitive members of the legal or medical professions, few would question the fact that it is genuinely funny. Nevertheless, there are at least three problems in using it in a real-life preaching situation. First, it does not exactly lend itself to any particular sermon topic. The most obvious choices - greed, personal integrity, and Christian witness should actually be excluded because this particular story draws its punch from some very stereotypical baggage. As a rule, this will make any anecdote of this type inappropriate for sermon use. It would seem the height of inconsistency for ministers to take umbrage at certain "preacher" stereotypes, yet think nothing of typecasting others in a similar fashion.

This particular joke is also useful in that it points out another all-too-common fallacy. An ongoing myth exists that if a piece of humor contains any reference to God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Heaven, Hell, the Devil, a preacher, priest, rabbi, Moses, saint Peter, pearly gates, etc., etc. (*ad nauseum*), then it is a likely candidate for inclusion in a sermon. This particular point cannot be overstated - a passing religious reference does not appropriate sermon humor make, for unless carefully examined and properly restrained, a general cheapening of the preaching experience can occur.

Beyond this, an even more difficult roadblock is presented by a less obvious fact. The story is too complete. The punch line very effectively generates laughter and brings the story to an end. It is virtually devoid of any "lead-in" qualities, an ultimately fatal flaw for any sermon-employed humor. In some respects, it is "too good" a joke, for what

remains for the speaker after using it is something akin to, “but seriously, folks...” It should be remembered that as a rule of thumb, the heavier the laugh impact of a story, the harder it is to find a way to jimmy it into a sermon.

Another likely application, although similarly worrisome, is using a humorous story simply because the subject matter appears to fit the general subject addressed by the message. If not found in the opening, this transplant will normally appear in some other needy portion of the sermon. This usage bears the same difficulties as mentioned beforehand, along with a couple of others. If the subject is not an exact match and does not contain an explicitly obvious tie-in to the meat of the sermon, the results will be considerably less than desired. As the old saying goes, “Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades,” and that is especially true in humor to subject correlation.

Another necessary, but often overlooked, consideration is that of predictability. The total population of church-appropriate humorous stories is a limited one indeed. And it is very likely that if you have heard such a story, your audience may very well have heard the same one. This presents a very dangerous situation from the standpoint of a speaker. One can imagine few things worse than having a member (or several members) of an audience completely tune out at a given point of a sermon simply because, ‘I’ve already heard that one,’ or, even worse, lying in wait like some crouching tiger waiting to repeat mentally, or (heaven forbid) audibly, the punch line just as you reach it. Another equally exasperating scenario exists if the version you employ happens to be somewhat modified from the one they have heard. The inconsistency will loom like a monolith before them and effectively cripple their ability to hear much else of anything you have to say until they have the opportunity to utter those infamous words in your presence

(generally after the service concludes), “That was good, preacher, but the way I heard that joke was...” You get the picture.

A common derivative of this type of humor may be referred to as *redeemed* or *sanctified* humor. It converts secular humor into a more appropriate device by altering its character, storyline, or slant. For example, consider this classic from Bruce Thielemann:

It was on the wall of a subway in New York City. There was an advertising poster which depicted a dignified older gentleman recommending a particular product. And someone, probably a little boy, wanted to deface the advertisement, so he drew a balloon coming out of the mouth of this dignified older gentleman, and then this youngster wrote in the balloon the dirtiest thing he could think of. He wrote, “I like -,” and he meant to write “girls,” only he made a mistake, and instead of writing “girls,” he wrote “grils.” “I like grils.”

Then someone had come along and with a felt-tipped pen had written under that, “It’s ‘girls,’ stupid, not ‘grils.’”

Then another party, for the handwriting was still different, had come and written under that, “But then what about us grils?”¹¹⁹

Humorous? Certainly. Hilarious? No. But Thielemann exploits the inherent humor of this storyline as a springboard to address his subject (the story of Zaccheus). He relates five short cameos of individuals who, for various reasons, feel marginalized, left out, different in the least flattering way, and labels each of them as a ‘*gril*.’ The effect is exceptional. The humor of his illustration not only serves as a great jumping off place, but strikes a chord of familiarity with the audience. Attention is commanded in a subtle manner and the hearer drawn into the message in such a way that their interest is piqued and held. It is an excellent example of leading humor, a display of one of the best traits that humor can bring to the preaching experience.

¹¹⁹ Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching that Connects: Using the Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact to Your Sermons*, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994), 40.

A similar example comes from a sermon from tent revival evangelist Jesse Buell.

In a sermon several years ago on salvation by grace, he offered up this jewel:

Years ago, a little boy was walking by the gates of Buckingham Palace. Every day he had walked by, and every day he stopped and peered through the iron gates, imagining what kind of beauty and people must live just behind those massive stone walls.

One day he finally summoned up all his courage and decided to try walking through the gate, but just as he got there, a stony-faced guard in a bearskin hat stepped out directly in front of him, and without so much as a word, pointed the young lad back in the direction he had come.

Dejected, the young boy walked to the curb and sat down, tears streaming down his ruddy little face. A few moments later, another young lad, just about the same age, came up and sat down beside the weeping boy. “Why are you crying?” he asked. Sniffing, the little boy said, “I just wanted to go in there and look around that palace, but the guard won’t let me in.”

“Oh, is that all?” answered the other little boy, “Come with me.” He reached out his hand, pulled the little boy to his feet, and led him straight back in the direction of the gate. The guard was still there, but this time he neither spoke nor moved as the two of them together walked right past the gate and into the courtyard.

The little boy who had been crying suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around, looking back in the direction they had come, “Wow,” he said, “How did you do that? That guard wouldn’t let me in at all, but you and I just walked right past him and he didn’t even say a word.”

The other little boy looked over at his newfound friend and smiled. “Oh, that’s alright,” he said, “my daddy lives here, and I can bring in anybody I please.”

Buell went on to say that the first time he ever heard the story, he immediately thought about Jesus, and how the story was a picture of grace that most everyone could relate to. Its effectiveness lies not only in its humor, but in its ability to tug at the heartstrings of an audience as well.

Another common method among ‘real-life’ preachers is that of using *original* or *experiential humor*. Humorist Grady Nutt once observed that the difference between a comedian and a humorist is that a comedian possesses the gift of creating humor, while a humorist has the gift of seeing humor in the day-to-day real life situations around them. Humor drawn from personal experience has a ring of authenticity and genuineness to it.

It helps to draw an audience into a story, and in the process, leaves them open to receive other truths being communicated as well.

In a sermon addressing the need to preach the Gospel everywhere, I once shared this personal recollection from my high school days:

When I was in my teens, I played guitar for a family gospel group called the Walkers. We were the classic ‘weekend warriors,’ singing on Saturday and Sunday evenings in large and small churches across a half dozen states.

One Saturday afternoon our Chevy van packed with guitars and sound equipment rolled into Union, South Carolina. As we pulled up to a red light, a small crowd gathered on a street corner caught our attention. There, standing on a small wooden platform, stood a bespectacled, redheaded man in his forties, sporting a red bowtie and preaching at the top of his ample lungs to the crowd gathered around him, the various pedestrians on the sidewalk, and the passing cars rolling down Main Street.

We rolled down the windows just long enough to hear a few exhortations before the light changed, and as we pulled away, an unusual quiet fell over that old van. I heard Herschael and Doris Walker, sitting in the front, say to each other, “You know, you just don’t see that sort of thing anymore.”

That evening, as we stepped up onto the podium, each of us, one at a time, caught sight of a familiar face in the first pew. There, seated where no one could possibly miss him, sat the young redheaded preacher - glasses, red bowtie, and all. We had no sooner reached the first chorus of our opening song before that preacher was up on his feet, clapping and raising his hands in the air, bursts of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” joining the rhythm and harmony of the song we were playing.

By the time we reached the second verse, this young man let out a joyful, “Praise God!” and started to run. He ran all the way across the front of the church and made a hard left down the outside aisle, every step punctuated by his own litany of praises. He continued across the back of the church, making two more tight left hand turns until he finally completed the circle, and came skidding to a stop at the very spot where he had begun. Then, with one final and very loud “Hallelujah,” he sat back down in his seat.

We had watched all this with some fascination, and as that first song drew to a close, I nudged our bass guitar player and whispered, “You know, Clark, I believe he got a lot more out of that song than most of these other people here.”

Experiential humor possesses that remarkable quality of relating to people on several different levels. No matter how different their own experience and situation may be, in most circumstances, a legitimate and useful connection takes place.

There are however, certain caveats for its use. First, it is very tempting to grandstand. In preaching, as in life, humility is one of the greatest acquired and most admired of virtues. If personal recollections, even humorous ones, tend to leave the speaker squarely in the spotlight at center stage as the hero on a relatively routine basis, it can be assured that any connection they might hope to achieve with their audience by way of humor will very shortly cease to exist.

Secondly, there is that monumental danger that something a particular speaker finds humorous may come across as something quite different for the members of their listening audience. If this takes place, you may be assured that the speaker, although the second to realize it, will be the last to regret it.

And thirdly, it bears mentioning that if one chooses to make one's spouse, child or some other member of the family the central character of a recounted humorous event, one should think long and hard about the danger of providing a little too much insight into aspects of family life and interaction that would otherwise remain private. Although asking permission in such cases is a foregone conclusion, one should also cautiously weigh the benefits against the risk. It is a hard enough thing to be the family member of a preacher, without having to contend with the constant fear of becoming the subject of an errant anecdote, suffering potential embarrassment for no better purpose than the possibility of creating entertainment value for a sermon.

As beneficial as each of these methods may be with proper care and handling, arguably the most effective method of injecting humor into a sermon is the use of *organic* or *native humor* - that extracted from the situation, character, or dialogue of the preaching

passage itself. It is, by rights, the most legitimate form of sermon humor, but requires both serious analysis and a certain degree of finesse in using it properly.

It should be remembered that biblical humor, much like the Bible characters themselves, appears in any number of styles and situations. An exhaustive list would be quite impossible to obtain, but a few examples should prove helpful.

For instance, in certain places, the Bible is master of understatement. Consider the parallel New Testament passages of Matthew and Luke 4:2 which recount the story of Jesus fasting in the wilderness for forty days. In what is at once one of the major understatements of the Bible, and at the same time, legitimate humor, both accounts state matter-of-factly that afterward Jesus “became hungry.”

A similar Old Testament passage appears in the description of the physical condition of the entire adult male population of the city of Shechem in Genesis 34:25. Three days following a coerced circumcision, the Bible indicates that they met their match because of an inability to fight - they were, quite simply, “in pain.”

Or in another Genesis passage, Isaac’s eldest son Esau is described as “a hairy man” and “like a hairy garment.” So much so, in fact, that Jacob, in attempting to deceive Isaac into believing that he was Esau actually used goat’s hair to impersonate the hair on his brother’s arms. If you have to use *goat’s hair* to do that, you are talking about one *hairy* man!

Admittedly, this is not the stuff of late night comedy shows, but when a preacher acknowledges the humor in passages like this, an effective dimension of reality is added to the account. This, in turn, allows the audience to identify with the story, its characters, and its message on a much more personal level.

Occasionally the humor is not so much to be found in the dialogue of a passage, but rather in the circumstances described by it. Take for example the first miracle that Jesus performs at the marriage in Cana of Galilee recorded in John chapter 2. When the nuptial celebration is threatened by a depletion of celebratory wine, Jesus' mother informs her son of the situation and although her request seems to meet with distance on His part, she has the presence of mind to instruct the servants to do, "Whatever He says to you."

John then very dutifully informs his readers that "there were six stone waterpots set there." There is nothing immediately humorous about this observation, until he adds that the reason they were there was "for the Jewish custom of purification." For many students of the New Testament, this statement will bring to mind the fact that the Pharisees were great believers in ceremonial hand washings, particularly before a feast. The marriage festivities described in this passage fall squarely into that category, so it would only seem reasonable to assume that the six waterpots in question are, in all likelihood, those that the marriage guests had used to wash their hands in upon their arrival at the feast.

This interjects a ruggedly funny bit of comedy into the story as the servants are directed to take the water drawn from the pots (now wine) to the headwaiter, which has, in all probability, been doling out orders to the servants for the past three days. With this little tidbit of information from John, we too are drawn into the humor of the author's observation that the headwaiter "Did not know where it came from," followed by the parenthetical "(But those who had drawn the water knew)." John has very effectively 'let

us in on the joke,’ so to speak, and once again, a very familiar passage takes on a new, surprising, and very human layer when interpreted with its humor intact.

It is worth stating that humor in the Scripture becomes easier and easier to find with practice, and the dividends are well worth the effort. For example, a few years ago I preached a sermon entitled “When the Cows Don’t Come Home” from 1 Samuel 6:10-21 in which I chronicled the misadventures of the Ark of the Covenant in its brief, but eventful, sojourn in the land of Philistia. Anyone capable of missing the humor in this particular passage should be checked for severe religious near-sightedness. From the graphically depicted insult to injury damages inflicted upon the so-called god, Dagon; to the peace offerings of mice and golden tumors; to the final solution by the Philistines of sending the ark back in a cart drawn by milk cows, lowing as they went; each new circumstance adds an additional layer of very delightful humor to the story. Even a novice should have little difficulty in locating the comedic elements, and to attempt to exegete this passage without them is to misinterpret the text at best and to violate it at worst.

In addition to each of these methodologies, one peripheral form also bears mentioning at this point. Several years ago, I saw a Revival poster for a certain evangelist in a church near to where I was pastoring. The poster was unique in that it not only contained the usual information one would expect - place, time, preacher, etc., but also a list of the sermon titles that the evangelist would be preaching during the course of the revival. One in particular caught my attention, it was entitled, “Between the Pole Beans and the Crook Neck Squash.” Intrigued, I attended the service and listened attentively to the sermon, but in all honesty, walked away feeling more manipulated than

blessed. The sermon title turned out to be nothing more than a throwaway line, having no connection whatever to the text or the context of the message presented. It was upsetting, but it also made me think that if I had attended the meeting on nothing more than the strength of a sermon title, then a clever title that telegraphed the real message of a sermon would be a wonderful accessory for any sermon to have. I also remembered that a former preaching professor, Herschael York, a former pastor himself, had once shared with a class his habit of interjecting a short ‘teaser’ on Sunday mornings for the following week’s sermon. In years since, a personal commitment to working on both a creative title and teaser for each sermon preached has yielded nothing but positive results. A few examples follow:

“And in this Corner...” - Genesis 32:22-32

There once was a man who wrestled with God and you’re not going to believe who won.

The Original Wonder Bread - Exodus 16:13-36

Ever wondered just how long bread will keep?

The Business End of a Lion - 1 Samuel 17:31-37

Some decisions don’t leave much room for a ‘Plan B.’

Full of Sap and Very Green - Psalm 92:10-15

“Aging gracefully” may have a lot to do with your location.

Some Gods You Carry, Some Carry You - Isaiah 46:3-10

What would you give to have someone in your life who would never let you down?

Please Pass the Vegetables - Daniel 1:1-14

Sometimes it’s okay to be a square peg in a world full of round holes.

The Bigger They Are, the Harder They Fall - Daniel 4:33-37

If you’re king of the hill and you take a tumble, it’s a long, long way down.

Preaching the Phone Book - Matthew 1:1-17

Ever thought all those ‘begat’s in the Bible were just a waste of space?

The Man Who Tried to Keep Christmas from Coming - Matthew 2:7-18

The Grinch had nothing on King Herod.

There Goes the Neighborhood - Mark 5:1-20

According to the people of Gadara, there is one thing worse than living next to a demon-possessed madman.

A Bad Case of Plank Eye - Luke 6:39-45

It's going to take a lot more than a good ophthalmologist to cure this condition where you can't see the forest for the tree.

You Want Me to Eat What? - Acts 10:1-23

In order for God to use us fully, He sometimes has to change the way we look at things.

The Dreadful Danger of Name Dropping - Acts 19:11-20

Be sure your schemes will find you out.

Similac ©, Not Sirloin - 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

For some people, growing up is hard to do.

Sin Happens - 1 John 1:1-2:2

Everybody does it, alright, that's the whole problem.

This is an excellent means of capitalizing on an all-too-often untapped medium for humor. If a title or a teaser can intrigue an audience member, or even generate a light-hearted chuckle, the odds of getting that person back into a pew improve substantially. Admittedly, it takes a bit more time and thought, but to make use of such an opportunity week after week can prove to be a real blessing. One might even say that a golf course should not be the only place to find a good *Titleist* ©.

For any given preaching event, when it comes to making a determination as to what, when, and how humor should be employed, the best approach is a three-step process. First, *examine the humor itself*. Be both meticulous and merciless at this point. Make your criteria severe. Is the piece truly humorous? Not, is it almost funny, or funny for just a few people. You should remember that the line between tasteful and 'over the edge' is sometimes a very thin one indeed. Recall that you can do some major, sometimes irreparable, damage to any sermon if a funny story or anecdote fails to deliver. Should the humor missile misfire, you may not be the first casualty, but you will certainly

be the last. You will appear either inept or pitiable, and neither result is in any way desirable for an individual entrusted with communicating the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Should you have any reservations, good advice is to take the piece for a test drive with several different individuals. Different ages, genders, socio-economic, educational and geographical backgrounds can provide a good indication as to whether an item is funny and also, whether it is appropriate. In the process, do not allow yourself the luxury of being offended by an honest response. Refrain from the temptation of trying to talk people into liking it, and under no circumstances be found guilty of attempting to explain the humor. If your test audience fails to ‘get it,’ the piece is either not funny, too complicated, or both, and should not be incorporated into a sermon.

The next important step is to *analyze your audience*. Is the subject matter appropriate? It is a well-worn cliché, but only because of its truthfulness, that you should attempt to put yourself in the place of those who will hear you. If there is the slightest possibility someone will find the subject or premise of your humor objectionable, do yourself an enormous favor and cut it loose. No matter how much you may think it will add to the sermon, the risk is simply not worth taking. Recall that you are not preaching to yourself, but to others. And the last thing you can afford is to come across as insensitive and overbearing, even where (and one might say, especially where) humor is concerned, for by definition this should be the lightest portion of the preaching event. Indeed there are times when preaching requires a bold, forthright presentation, “a hill large enough to die on,” so to speak, but a humorous story will never fall into that category.

Also, understand that for some audiences certain subjects are completely off limits. In employing humor, ‘shunning the very appearance of evil” in this regard is an absolute necessity. A missed opportunity is always preferable to a train wreck. The primary thing to keep in mind is that a word once spoken cannot be recalled, no matter how much one might wish it so. When in doubt, it is simply better to refrain.

In similar fashion, for certain audiences, specific styles of humor are likewise taboo. To offer an example, certain ‘off the cuff” observations occasionally provide a welcome breather in a sermon and an opportunity for the audience to catch its collective breath when the subject matter being addressed is especially somber or serious. In other situations however, the same utterance will succeed only in desecrating the mood you have created and provide a far too convenient opportunity for an audience to both mentally and spiritually disengage.

For example, most church goers have heard ministers describe in graphic detail the herd of swine leaping headlong into the sea lemming style, after being possessed by the demons unleashed from Legion in Mark chapter 5. Yet I have also heard that same description followed by the comment that this was the first documented case of “swine flew” or (even worse) a terrible case of “suuu-eee-cide.” Such one-liners might be appropriate for an audience that enjoys its humor *a’la* Henny Youngman, but others will just as easily be turned off by such verbiage and, consequently, tune out.

One should also recognize that, in certain church settings, restraint is sometimes confused with reverence. A deafening silence following any attempt at humor will be a dead give away that a preacher is in the presence of just such an audience. Until one knows with some degree of certainty the humor level tolerance of a given group, it is a

good idea to start light and be prepared to retreat. Remember, humor within a sermon is not a necessity, but faithfully declaring God's message is. And one cannot place the latter at risk by selfishly insisting on the former. Learning flexibility in such situations is one of the best acquired skills a preacher can obtain.

It also bears stating that as a rule of thumb, the longer your relationship with a particular congregation, the more trust you develop, and the greater leeway they will allow you in matters of preaching, particularly in the area of humor. It is wise, however, not to violate this trust, particularly for something as fleeting and inconsequential as a cheap laugh.

A final step is to *analyze your motivation*. This cannot be stressed strongly enough. Why have you chosen this particular piece of humor? What kind of reaction do you hope to generate? Until you know what it is you wish to accomplish and how a particular piece of humor fits into a particular sermon framework, you should forbear. Humor at its best may seem light, improvisational, even impromptu, but in reality, its use in a sermon context requires substantial thought and planning.

And finally, if there is one great admonition to keep in mind for employing humor in a sermon, it is this: Avoid overkill. Humor is a wonderful tool, but it is only a tool. It must never be allowed to distract from the primary message being communicated. In remembering that with sermonic humor 'less is more,' one would be wise to keep in mind Hyers counsel that, "Wit is the salt of speech, not the food."¹²⁰

As tempting as over-humorizing a sermon may be, the dangers associated with such an approach are many and quite serious. First, as far as the call of God on a

¹²⁰ Hyers, *Laughter*, 201.

person's life is concerned, it would seem most inappropriate for a minister to be considered a comic first and a preacher second. Second, a humorous element that has no real connection with the sermon material itself lends itself to major confusion on the part of the audience. Robinson's famous line that "A mist in the pulpit becomes a fog in the pew"¹²¹ is doubly true for humor. It is reminiscent of the story of the country preacher, who upon delivering a thunderous admonishment against the dangers of alcohol concluded his fiery sermon with his own desire that "all the liquor in the county be cast into a nearby river." Following this stirring exhortation, a rather sheepish song leader instructed the congregation to turn to their selected hymn for the morning, "Shall We Gather at the River?"

Every preacher and every congregation is different. In fact, every preaching event is different. The main thing to keep in mind is that humor should never be used merely for the sake of being funny, but rather to achieve an emotional response from the audience which leads to a greater openness and receptivity to the message that we have been called to communicate.

¹²¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 141.

CHAPTER 5

LESSON PLAN FOR SEMINAR

In an effort to communicate the various precepts contained in this study of humor to individuals who might make the best and most effective use of them in the proclamation of the Gospel, the following is a general lesson plan for a seminar based upon these concepts. Although primarily directed to an audience of pastors, the general principles covered would also be beneficial for other teachers or ministers commissioned with the task of communicating biblical truth to an audience. The seminar as presented should run in the neighborhood of two hours, but could readily be adapted for length and content based on the particular audience addressed. In conducting this seminar it is important to keep in mind that the results will ultimately be enhanced if the humor used for examples is both up to date and consistent with the personality of the presenter.

The desired outcome of this seminar is for those attending to be able to identify various types and sources of biblical and secular humor and discriminate between those that are appropriate for use in a preaching setting, and those that are not. To achieve this end, five main goals of the seminar include:

- 1) Seminar participants will gain a knowledge of the widely varying opinions on the use of humor in preaching, from staunch supporters to vocal detractors.
- 2) The attendees will be able to recognize the use of humor in both Old and New Testament passages and then be able to distinguish similar humor in other Biblical passages.

3) Participants will come to identify some of the different types of humor that Jesus employed during his earthly ministry and the purpose behind their use.

4) Seminar attendees will leave the presentation with an understanding of the four basic ways that humor can be introduced into a sermon.

5) Participants in the seminar will leave with a three-step method for judging whether or not a particular piece of humor is appropriate for use in a sermon.

Although the means by which these goals are addressed will have some overlap within the seminar material, Goal number 1 will be primarily taken up under Section II, and, to some extent, Sections I and VII. Goal 2 will be the subject of Sections III, IV, and VI. Section V will address in depth goal number 3. Goal 4 will be the focus of section VIII and, by backward reference, the introduction. Section IX will be devoted to Goal 5. And the conclusion, Section X, will offer both select reminders and further insights into the subject of humor and its particular use in the preaching event.

The material will be presented in the following manner:

THE BEJEWELLED PIG SNOUT
Appropriate Use of Humor
SEMINAR OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

A. Two Real-life examples:

1. *The Preacher between Two Thieves* anecdote:

An old preacher was dying. He sent a message for his doctor and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home. When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit, one on each side of his bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling.

For a time, no one said anything. Both the doctor and lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, uncomfortable sermons about greed, covetousness and avaricious behavior that made them squirm in their seats.

Finally, the doctor said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?"

The old preacher mustered up his strength, then said weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves; and that's how I want to go too."

2. *The Dead Men Don't Bleed* story:

There once was a man who needed routine surgery. It was the first operation he had ever had in his life, so his doctor went to great lengths to explain the procedure along with its minimal risks. The patient seemed a bit concerned (after all, no procedure is ever 'routine' if it's happening to you), but with the doctor's assurances he eventually agreed to go with ahead it.

The next day he checked into the hospital, was put to sleep, and the procedure performed. Everything was going just fine; right up until the time the patient came to in the recovery room. His wife, seeing him open his eyes, smiled and said, "Hi, honey, how are you feeling." To which he responded in terror, "Oh my goodness, I didn't make it!"

"What do you mean?" his wife asked, "You're perfectly fine, the doctor said everything came off like clockwork."

"Noooo," the patient whined, "I know it's a terrible shock. I can barely believe it myself, but...but, I'm dead!"

"Don't be silly," his wife said, thinking he was making a very bad joke, but the longer he talked, the more she became convinced that he was completely serious. He honestly believed that he was dead. Not knowing what else to do, the wife called for the nurse.

"Sir," she said firmly, "You are not dead. You are quite alive. Here, let me check your vital signs and I'll show you."

The man pulled away immediately, "Nooo," he said, "It's no use. I'm not blaming you, but it is quite obvious that I'm dead." The nurse tried again and again to reassure him, but the man simply wouldn't listen. Exasperated, the nurse finally said, "You just wait right here, I'll ring for your doctor and then you'll see, this is all in your head. You are very much alive."

A few minutes later, the doctor arrived and the nurse, in whispered tones, explained what was going on. "Oh, come now," said the doctor, "the operation was a complete success, everything turned out find. Sir, you are very much alive."

The man just waved his hand, "Look Doc, I'm not saying you did anything wrong. I know you did your best, but sometimes our best just

isn't good enough." The man looked down at his feet. "I didn't make it, that's all."

The doctor grabbed the man's charts from the end of his bed.

"Look here," he said, tossing the charts in his direction. "These charts prove it. Infection - none. Blood pressure, respiration, heart rate, all normal. Mister, you are alive, do you understand, alive!" But it was no use, try as he may, the doctor could not manage to convince him. "All right," the doctor said finally, "You leave me no choice, I'm calling in the hospital psychiatrist."

The psychiatrist soon arrived and sat listening intently as the man explained that he bore no malice and was convinced his family would not sue for malpractice, but, in spite of what everyone else seemed to believe, he was, quite certainly - dead.

The psychiatrist thought for a moment and then smiled, looked intently into the patient's eyes and said, "Sir, you are aware of the fact that dead men don't bleed."

"Of course, Doc," the man replied, "everybody knows that."

"You are sure of this, are you?" continued the psychiatrist.

"Doc, I'm not sure where you studied medicine, but everybody, even folks without a medical degree know that dead men can't bleed. Their heart stops beating, so no blood is flowing, it's quite impossible, Doc. Dead men don't bleed."

While the man was talking, the psychiatrist managed to retrieve a small lancet from his pocket and reaching forward, seized the patient by his index finger, and with one deft movement, left a single drop of blood welling up at the end of the patient's extended digit.

"There, what do you say to that?" smiled the smug psychiatrist.

"Well, what do you know?" replied the patient, staring in wonder at his index finger, "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, Doc, I never would have believed it, not in a million years...Dead men do bleed after all!"

B. Questions to the audience:

1. Would you feel comfortable using either, both or neither of these in your own ministry setting? Which one(s)? Why or Why not?

C. Examination of Pro's and Con's of each example:

The Preacher between Two Thieves

PRO'S

- The story arrests the attention of the audience.
- The story is genuinely funny.

CON'S

- It does not lend itself to any particular sermon topic.
- It feeds inappropriate stereotypes.
- It suffers from an all-too-common fallacy - a passing religious reference does not appropriate sermon humor make.
- It is too complete, virtually devoid of any "lead-in" qualities.
- Predictability may also be a problem.

Dead Men Don't Bleed

PRO'S

- The story arrests the attention of the audience.
- The story is genuinely funny.
- It lends itself to various sermon topics (belief, faith, error, etc.)
- It has good lead in qualities.

CON'S

- It may be too lengthy.
- Here too, familiarity might present a problem.

I. WHERE IS HUMOR USED?

A. Question to audience, what three places is humor most likely to appear in our culture?

1. Entertainment

2. Social Commentary (political cartoons, etc.)

3. Sales and Marketing

a) Photos depicting previous Super Bowl Ads:

- Happy Cows – California Cheese Council ©
- Racing With Cheetahs – Mountain Dew ©
- Working with an Office Full of Monkeys – CareerBuilder.com ©
- Tranquilizer Dart – Quizno's ©
- Jackie Chan – Hanes ©
- Willie Nelson – H&R Block ©
- Terry Tate, Office Linebacker – Reebok ©
- Running of the Squirrels – EDS ©

- Sock Puppet Spokesman– Pets.com ©
- Zebra Referee Instant Replay – Budweiser ©
- Relaxing in the Pool – M&M’s ©
- Burt Reynolds and the Bear – FedEx ©

b) Three Things these Ads have in Common:

- Each commercial aired during one of the past three Super Bowls.
- Each employed humor in an effort to market their product.
- And each shared approximately the same price tag: each 30 Second spot sold for an amount in excess of \$2,400,000.00.

(1) Question for discussion: Did they succeed in being funny?

(2) Question for discussion: Did they succeed in their main goal - selling the product? (It is quite possible achieve one without the other.)

II. BUT IS HUMOR APPROPRIATE IN COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH? (Pro’s and Con’s)

A. Is Humor Appropriate in Preaching? (Con quotations)

- The Second Council of Constance [1418] - “If any cleric or monk speaks jocular words, such as provoke laughter, let him be anathema.” ¹²²
- John Wesley (to his students) - “Let your whole deportment before the congregation be serious, weighty, and solemn.” ¹²³
- Thomas Shepard - “Your work is great, and requires great seriousness.” ¹²⁴
- Reinhold Niehbur – “Laughter is acceptable...in the vestibule of the Temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer and no laughter, in the holy of holies.” ¹²⁵
- David Martin-Lloyd Jones – ““Light entertainment, easy familiarity and jocularity (joking) are not compatible with a realization of the seriousness of the condition of the souls of all men by nature, the fact that they are lost and in danger of eternal perdition, and their consequent need of salvation.” ¹²⁶

¹²² Byrne, 556.

¹²³ Wesley, 317.

¹²⁴ Thomas Shepard, quoted by Benjamin Brook in *Lives of the Puritans*, (Solo Dei Gloria Publications, Morgan, PA, 2002), 199.

¹²⁵ Niehbur, 115.

¹²⁶ Lloyd-Jones, 10.

B. Is There Humor in the Bible? (Con quotations)

- A. N. Whitehead - “The total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literatures.” ¹²⁷
- John Caples – “The two most influential books in the world have no humor in them: the Bible and the Sears Catalog!” ¹²⁸

C. Does God Have a Sense of Humor? (Con quotations)

- John Morreall - “God cannot be surprised at anything because He knows the past, present, and future. Since God is a changeless Being, nothing that happens could amuse Him. He would already know about all the possible incongruities of life, and He would not be able to experience the psychological shift that, according to some, is behind all laughter.” ¹²⁹

D. Is Humor Appropriate in Preaching? (Pro quotations)

- John Drakeford - “One of the most effective ways of overcoming hostility and building relationships in our day is the use of humor, and it has a place at every stage of the sermon.” ¹³⁰
- Bert Decker and Hershael York - “Humor creates a special bond between you and your listeners. It’s virtually impossible to dislike someone who makes us laugh, who helps us enjoy ourselves. We are able to accept tough truths and even correction when they are presented with a light touch. We not only tend to like to be around people with a sense of humor who can laugh at themselves and the world around them, we tend to trust them more than the grim and serious. A sense of humor – whether sharp and explosive or dry and witty - makes you appear more genial, warmer, and more likable. And the strong, pleasurable emotions people associate with good fun and high spirits make your message enjoyable to listen to - and memorable.” ¹³¹
- Bill Hybels - “Some people come to church not expecting to find themselves enjoying the experience. If I can get them laughing, they relax and become more open to what I’m about to say...with all that pain and guilt and sin-talking floating in the air, with people feeling nervous or perhaps expecting to be offended, anything I can say that disarms them for a moment is precious.” ¹³²

¹²⁷ Whitehead, 30.

¹²⁸ Caples, 32.

¹²⁹ Morreall, 126.

¹³⁰ Drakeford. 30.

¹³¹ Decker and York, 92.

¹³² Hybels, 95.

- Cal Samra - “Humor is a gift to the church, but there are people in all churches who would discourage and suppress it....Some Christians (of all denominations) have taken pride in their long-faced gloominess, and their relentless melancholia has driven a lot of potential converts away, much to the great glee of the Devil.”¹³³
- Cal Samra - “Humor reminds us of our fragility, our weakness, our humanity. It teaches us not to take ourselves too seriously. It helps us learn humility. Humor is threatening only to the proud, the self-righteous, and the pharisaical, who even today are inclined to crucify people who express joy and wit.”¹³⁴
- Fred Craddock - “Humor properly joined to the matter of the sermon, feels at home and is thus free to frolic, laugh, and celebrate the grace of God. Humor is, after all, inevitable in truly good preaching, because all the right ingredients are present: concrete specific references, no one laughs at the general and abstract...Humor is, then, a genuine response to grace; grace works in us that most beautiful virtue, gratitude; and the grateful person acknowledges that there is usually a small party going on in the back of his mind. All this, of course, makes no sense to the humorless calculator who carefully inserts a joke here and there to break up the monotony of a sermon which, in its intense effort to be totally serious, generates smiles and muffled laughter.”¹³⁵

E. Is There Humor in the Bible? (Pro quotations)

- Conrad Hyers - “Comic devices are by no means foreign to the Bible. They are not always easy to see because of the enormous problems in trying to translate puns, plays upon words, ironic twists, and satirical illusions. We usually miss the punch line and the point as well. As we say, it loses something in translation. Humorous expressions and the contexts that make them humorous are the most difficult items to convey from one language to another, even with cumbersome footnotes or parenthetical explanations – and once explained, they cease to be humorous anyway.”¹³⁶
- Conrad Hyers - “Comic themes and devices are also not easily seen because of the prevailing assumption that such elements do not exist in Holy Scriptures. A person who is not open to the possibility of comic elements is not likely to be looking for instances or to see them, even by accident. The biblical writers, it is assumed, were a humorless lot.”¹³⁷

¹³³ Samra, 5.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 10.

¹³⁵ Craddock, 219.

¹³⁶ Hyers, *Laughter*, 3.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 4.

- Cal Samra - "In one New Testament concordance there are 287 references to joy, gladness, merriment, rejoicing, delighting, laughing, etc."¹³⁸ This would certainly suggest at least the possibility, if not the probability, that humor likewise may dwell among its pages.
- Lee van Rensburg – One factor that detracts from the easy recognition of humor in the Scripture is that of the dubious legacy our century has received from the almost stifling interest that the last century showed in the divine wrath and judgment. Many preachers of that era felt it necessary to dangle their listeners over the flames of a burning hell. While the intent may have been to drive souls into the kingdom of heaven, the side effect was to drive all notions of humor out of the Bible and religion itself."¹³⁹

F. Does God Have a Sense of Humor? (Pro quotations)

- G. K. Chesterton - "I have often thought that the gigantic secret of God is mirth."¹⁴⁰
- Grady Nutt - "If you don't think God has a sense of humor, just take a good look at the person sitting next to you."¹⁴¹

III. DOES GOD HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR AND DID HE PASS IT ON TO US?

A. Is there a scriptural record of God laughing?

1. Examination of Psalm 2:1-4
2. Examination of Psalm 37:12-13

B. Discussion of humor as an aspect of the *Imago Dei*

1. Conrad Hyers - "Although it is true that Genesis 1 does not mention laughter or humor as aspects of the image and likeness of God, neither does it mention any of these other attributes...human personality, language, reason, conscience, imagination, creativity, aesthetic awareness religiousness."¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Samra, 67.

¹³⁹ Van Rensburg, 20.

¹⁴⁰ Palmer, 15.

¹⁴¹ Grady Nutt, from a live performance at Cumberland College, Williamsburg, KY in April 1979.

¹⁴² Hyers, *Laughter*, 16.

2. Lee van Rensburg - “The highest act of creation is a reflection of the divine (Genesis 1:27). It is humor, among the other spiritual gifts to man...that sets man apart...enables him to enjoy what the rest of creation cannot. It is difficult to conceive of the Creator bestowing such a gift as humor upon man while failing to enjoy the dimensions of the gift within the divine Self. Simple syllogistic logic affirms that you cannot have in the conclusion that which is not in the premise. Far more acceptable is the affirmation that because humor is first in the Divine, so also it is given as a gift to man in his *imago Dei*.”¹⁴³

IV. OLD TESTAMENT HUMOR

A. Various references

1. First appearance - Abraham, Sarah and Isaac (Genesis 17, 18)
2. Jacob’s wrestling match (Genesis 32)
3. Moses’ rod turned serpent (Exodus 4)
4. Balaam and the talking donkey (Numbers 22)
5. The angel of the Lord’s greeting to Gideon (Judges 6:12)

B. Wisdom Literature

1. Fools
 - a) Proverbs 17:10
 - b) Proverbs 27:22
 - c) Proverbs 26:3
 - d) Ecclesiastes 10:1
2. The Lazy
 - a) Proverbs 10:26
 - b) Proverbs 26:14-15

¹⁴³ Van Rensburg, 34.

3. Meddlers

- a) Proverbs 26:17

4. Loose and Argumentative Women

- a) Proverbs 11:22
- b) Proverbs 25:24
- c) Proverbs 27:15

C. The Prophets

1. Elijah

- a) Taunting the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:27)

2. Isaiah

- a) On idol worship (44:14-17)

3. Amos

- a) On indifferent ladies of leisure (4:1-2)
- b) On Israel's careless worship (4:4-5)

(1) With an equally humorous request from his nemesis,
the rebel prophet Amaziah (7:12)

4. Jonah

- a) On God's mercy to the Ninevites (4:2b)

5. Isaiah

- a) Upon the impending divine judgment on Babylon (14:23);
- b) Moab (25:10);
- c) And those who practice merciless destruction (33:11a)

6. Hosea

a) In frustration over Israel's ongoing rebellion (4:16)

b) and (7:8-11a)

7. Quote from Jakob S. Jonsson - "The prophets use strong words and expressions, and they paint their pictures with striking colours. Consequently the scoffing and sarcasm of the prophet must not be classified as an expression of hatred or lack of sympathy towards the people they are scolding, but just the opposite."¹⁴⁴

D. The dark irony of the end of villains

1. Haman (Esther 7:7-9)

2. Absalom (2 Samuel 18:9-15)

3. Ahab (1 Kings 22:34-38)

4. Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30-37)

V. DID JESUS EVER LAUGH?

A. Observations from theologians

- "But would the multitudes have followed a gloomy Messiah?"¹⁴⁵ – Cal Samra
- "Jesus had an excellent sense of humor and pungent wit. If he hadn't, he could not have made such a favorable impression on publicans and sinners, and such an unfavorable impression on the religious establishment,"¹⁴⁶ – Humphrey Osmond
- "The widespread failure to recognize and to appreciate the humor of Christ is one of the most amazing aspects of the era named for Him. Anyone who reads the Synoptic Gospels with a relative freedom from presuppositions might be expected to see that Christ laughed, and that He expected others to laugh, but our capacity to miss this aspect of His life is phenomenal."¹⁴⁷ – Elton Trueblood

¹⁴⁴ Jónsson, 43.

¹⁴⁵ Samra, 8.

¹⁴⁶ Bonham, 65.

¹⁴⁷ Trueblood, 15.

- "It is hard to conceive of a Savior devoid of a sense of humor or the ability to laugh, and one would wonder if that would be a salvation for us at all."¹⁴⁸ – Lee van Rensburg
- "The main reason we miss Jesus' humor is the fact that we worship him, and that is usually serious business."¹⁴⁹ - Larry M. Taylor

B. Early ministry examples

1. "Born again" conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3-4)
2. Camel through a needle's eye (Matthew 19:23-24 and Mark 10:23-24)

C. The humor of Jesus - Comic Exaggeration and Hyperbole (van Rensburg)

1. Straining gnats while swallowing camels (Matthew 23:24)
2. Cleaning the outside of the cup while leaving the inside dirty (Matthew 23:25)
3. The blind leading the blind (Matthew 15:14)
4. The forgiven man being unforgiving (Matthew 18:28)
5. The dead burying the dead (Matthew 8:22)
6. Cutting off body parts in order to save one's self (recorded in Matthew 5:29-30 and repeated in 18:8-9)

D. The humor of Jesus - Irony and Satire (Hyers)

1. Whitewashing tombs (Matthew 23:27)
2. Honoring past prophets while plotting to kill present ones (Matthew 23:29-37)

E. The humor of Jesus - Irony and Satire (Trueblood)

1. Grapes from thorn bushes and figs from thistles (Matthew 7:16)
2. The householder knowing when the thief would break in (Luke 12:39)
3. Sounding a trumpet before giving alms (Matthew 6:1-2)

¹⁴⁸ Van Rensburg, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, 15.

4. The proselyte becoming twice the son of hell as his teacher (Matthew 23:15)
5. The tax collectors and harlots entering the kingdom before the Pharisees (Matthew 21:31)

F. The humor of Jesus - Comic Reversals (Trueblood)

1. Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30)
2. The Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19)
3. The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9)
4. The Great Supper (Luke 14:15)

G. The humor of Jesus - Paradox (van Rensburg)

1. The first being last and the last first (Matthew 19:30)
2. Losing your life in order to find it (Matthew 10:39)
3. The greatest assuming the place of the youngest, and the leader the servant (Luke 22:26)
4. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-26).

H. The humor of Jesus - Sarcasm (van Rensburg)

1. Asking the reason for being stoned (John 10:32)
2. Calling King Herod a fox (Luke 13:32*b*)

I. The humor of Jesus - Banter (Trueblood)

1. The exchanges between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman. (Matthew 15:21-28)

J. Quote from Tal Bonham - "The New Testament records only thirty-five days of His entire thirty-three years - an average of about one out of every thirty days of His three-year ministry. And, even at that, only fragments of these days are usually chronicled."¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Bonham, 63.

K. Quote from Elton Trueblood - “We seek humor for humor’s sake. There seems to be little or none of this in the recorded words of Christ, where the purpose is always the revelation of some facet of truth which would not otherwise be revealed. The humor of Christ is employed, it would appear, only because it is a means of calling attention to what would, without it, remain hidden or unappreciated. Truth and truth alone, is the end.”¹⁵¹

VI. NEW TESTAMENT HUMOR

A. Humor in the Acts of the Apostles

1. Peter’s defense of the apostles not being drunk at 9 a.m. (2:14b-15)
2. The “Unknown God” of the Areopagus (17:22b-23)
3. From the opposing side - the beating of the sons of Sceva (19:14-16)
4. Peter’s unclean creatures vision at Joppa (10:12-13)
5. Rhoda’s failure to convince those at the prayer meeting of Peter’s divine release and leaving him locked outside (12:12-15)
6. The dark humor of Herod Agrippa’s being eaten by worms (12:20-23)

B. Humor in the Epistles

1. Romans

- a) Paul’s multiple repetitions of “*Meyenoito!*” - May it never be!” (Romans 3:3-4, 5-6, 31; 6:1-2, 15; 7:7, 13, 9:14; 11:1, 11)

2. 1 Corinthians

- a) Jakob Jonsson’s quote: “Paul displays his humorous gifts especially in writing to the Corinthians, because their problems resulted from taking themselves too seriously.”¹⁵²
- b) Giving the ‘spiritually mature’ Corinthians milk instead of solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2)

¹⁵¹ Trueblood, 43.

¹⁵² Ibid, 79.

- c) Six different warnings against becoming “*phusioo*” - “puffed up.”
 - d) Paul’s refusal to praise the church for their actions (11:22)
 - e) Paul’s images and illustrations:
 - (1) Shadowboxing (1 Corinthians 10:26)
 - (2) A conversation among body parts (12:15-21)
 - f) 20 questions, each with different answers (chapter 6)
3. 2 Corinthians
- a) Paul’s “anti-autobiography” (2 Corinthians 11:1-12:10)
4. Philippians
- a) Paul’s use of the term “*skubala*” - “dung” (3:8)
5. “Busybodies” in (2 Thessalonians 3:11, 1 Timothy 5:13)
6. 2 Timothy
- a) Warnings against those who would “captivate weak women” (3:6)
7. Galatians
- a) The “bloody joke” against those championing the cause of circumcision (5:12)
8. Paul’s most obvious use, becoming uncircumcised (1 Corinthians 7:18a)
9. James
- a) The man looking in a mirror and forgetting “what kind of person he was” (1:23-24)
 - b) Describing the human tongue as “the very world of iniquity” which “No one came tame...a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (v. 8)

VII. How humor affects us physically

A. Quote from William Fry - "Extensive research has concluded that laughter stimulates the production of catecholamine, a hormone scientists have associated with alertness, and makes the laughing person more responsive." ¹⁵³

B. Quote from Raymond Moody - "Laughter stimulates the brain to produce the alertness hormone, catecholamine – a complex substance that contains epinephrine, norepinephrine, and dopamine and enables us to respond physically to emergencies. In turn, the arousal hormone stimulates the release of endorphins – the body's natural painkillers. As the brain's level of endorphins increases, the perception of pain decreases. Laughter, then, causes the body to produce its own painkiller." ¹⁵⁴

VIII. Four Ways to Interject Humor into a Sermon

A. Transplanted or Borrowed humor - the speaker employs secular humor directly

1. Example: (previous) *The Preacher between Two Thieves*

2. Advantages

- A pre-packaged nature, already proven humorous
- Familiarity with audience

3. Disadvantages

- May not fit a particular sermon topic
- May lean too heavily on certain inappropriate stereotypes
- A passing religious reference does not appropriate sermon humor make.
- Often has a lack of lead in qualities
- The heavier the laugh impact of a story, the harder it is to find a way to use it in a sermon.
- If the subject of the story is not an exact match and does not contain an explicitly obvious tie-in to the meat of the sermon, the results will be considerably less than desired. As the old saying goes, "Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."
- Predictability

¹⁵³ Drakeford, 55.

¹⁵⁴ Meberg, 37.

- B. Redeemed or Sanctified humor - also known as “hijacked” humor - converting secular humor into a more appropriate device by altering its character, storyline, or slant

1. Example: *My Daddy Lives Here*

Years ago, a little boy was walking by the gates of Buckingham Palace. Every day he had walked by, and every day he stopped and peered through the iron gates, imagining what kind of beauty and people must live just behind those massive stone walls.

One day he finally summoned up all his courage and decided to try walking through the gate, but just as he got there, a stony-faced guard in a bearskin hat stepped out directly in front of him, and without so much as a word, pointed the young lad back in the direction he had come.

Dejected, the young boy walked to the curb and sat down, tears streaming down his ruddy little face. A few moments later, another young lad, just about the same age, came up and sat down beside the weeping boy. “Why are you crying?” he asked. Sniffling, the little boy said, “I just wanted to go in there and look around that palace, but the guard won’t let me in.”

“Oh, is that all?” answered the other little boy, “Come with me.” He reached out his hand, pulled the little boy to his feet, and led him straight back in the direction of the gate. The guard was still there, but this time he neither spoke nor moved as the two of them together walked right past the gate and into the courtyard.

The little boy who had been crying suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around, looking back in the direction they had come, “Wow,” he said, “How did you do that? That guard wouldn’t let me in at all, but you and I just walked right past him and he didn’t even say a word.”

The other little boy looked over at his newfound friend and smiled. “Oh, that’s okay,” he said, “my daddy lives here, and I can bring in anybody I please.” [A picture of *Grace*]

2. Advantages

- Takes advantage of an already proven humorous story by adapting it to fit the need of a particular sermon.

3. Disadvantages

- Should it be too familiar, the attention of the audience may become fixed upon the known storyline or ending and create a distraction for the audience.

C. Original or Experiential Humor - humor based on personal experience or observation

1. Observation from humorist Grady Nutt that the difference between a comedian and a humorist is that a comedian possesses the gift of creating humor, while a humorist has the gift of seeing humor in the day-to-day real life situations around them.

2. Example: *More Out of That Song*

When I was in my teens, I played guitar for a family gospel group called the Walkers. We were the classic ‘weekend warriors,’ singing on Saturday and Sunday evenings in large and small churches across a half dozen states.

One Saturday afternoon our Chevy van packed with guitars and sound equipment rolled into Union, South Carolina. As we pulled up to a red light, a small crowd gathered on a street corner caught our attention. There, standing on a small wooden platform, stood a bespectacled, redheaded man in his forties, sporting a red bowtie and preaching at the top of his ample lungs to the crowd gathered around him, the various pedestrians on the sidewalk, and the passing cars rolling down Main Street.

We rolled down the windows just long enough to hear a few exhortations before the light changed, and as we pulled away, an unusual quiet fell over that old van. I heard Herschael and Doris Walker, sitting in the front, say to each other, “You know, you just don’t see that sort of thing anymore.”

That evening, as we stepped up onto the podium, each of us, one at a time, caught sight of a familiar face in the first pew. There, seated where no one could possibly miss him, sat the young redheaded preacher - glasses, red bowtie, and all.

We had no sooner reached the first chorus of our opening song before that preacher was up on his feet, clapping and raising his hands in the air, bursts of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” joining the rhythm and harmony of the song we were playing and singing.

By the time we reached the second verse, this young man let out a joyful, “Praise God!” and started to run. He ran all the way across the front of the church and made a hard left down the outside aisle, every step punctuated by his own litany of praises. He continued across the back of the church, making two more tight left hand turns until he finally completed the circle, and came skidding to a stop at the very spot where he had begun. Then, with one final and very loud “Hallelujah,” he sat back down in his seat.

We had watched all this with some fascination, and as that first song drew to a close, I nudged our bass guitar player and whispered, “You

know, Clark, I believe he got a lot more out of that song than most of these other people here.”

3. Advantages

- Easiest to come by
- Ease of relating to an audience (shared experience)
- Allows for passionate delivery
- Makes the audience think more of you as a person

4. Disadvantages

- Temptation to grandstand
- The monumental danger that something a particular speaker finds humorous may come across as something quite different for the members of their listening audience
- Using one’s spouse, child or some other member of the family the central character in a recounted humorous may provide a little too much insight into aspects of family life and interaction that would (and occasionally should) otherwise remain private.

D. Native or Organic Humor - that extracted from the situation, character, or dialogue of the preaching passage itself

1. Example: *Water into Wine*

The humor in this case is not so much to be found in the dialogue of a passage, but rather in the circumstances described by it. In John chapter 2, the nuptial celebration in Cana of Galilee is threatened by a depletion of celebratory wine, Jesus’ mother informs her son of the situation and although her request seems to meet with distance on His part, she has the presence of mind to instruct the servants to do, “Whatever He says to you.”

John then very dutifully informs his readers that “there were six stone waterpots set there.” There is nothing immediately humorous about this observation, until he adds that the reason they were there was “for the Jewish custom of purification.” For many students of the New Testament, this statement will bring to mind the fact that the Pharisees were great believers in ceremonial hand washings, particularly before a feast. The marriage festivities described in this passage fall squarely into that category, so it would only seem reasonable to assume that the six waterpots in question are, in all likelihood, those that the marriage guests had used to wash their hands in upon their arrival at the feast.

This interjects a ruggedly funny bit of comedy into the story as the servants are directed to take the water drawn from the pots (now wine) to the headwaiter, which has, in all probability, been doling out orders to the

servants for the past three days. With this little tidbit of information from John, we too are drawn into the humor of the author's observation that the headwaiter "Did not know where it came from," followed by the parenthetical "(But those who had drawn the water knew)." John has very effectively 'let us in on the joke,' so to speak, and once again, a very familiar passage takes on a new, surprising, and very human layer when interpreted with its humor intact.

2. Advantages

- Most legitimate type of humor
- Often eye-opening for your audience

3. Disadvantages

- Temptation to isogete
- Requires careful study

E. Creative Titling

1. Examples:

- ***"And in This Corner..." – Genesis 32:22-32***
There once was a man who wrestled with God and you're not going to believe who won.
- ***The Original Wonder Bread – Exodus 16:13-36***
Ever wondered just how long bread will keep?
- ***The Business End of a Lion – 1 Samuel 17:31-37***
Some decisions don't leave much room for a 'Plan B.'
- ***Full of Sap and Very Green – Psalm 92:10-15***
'Aging gracefully' may have a lot to do with your location.
- ***Some Gods You Carry, Some Carry You – Isaiah 46:3-10***
What would you give to have someone in your life who would never let you down?
- ***Please Pass the Vegetables – Daniel 1:1-14***
Sometimes it's okay to be a square peg in a world full of round holes.
- ***The Bigger They Are, the Harder They Fall – Daniel 4:33-37***
If you're king of the hill and you take a tumble, it's a long, long way down.
- ***Preaching the Phone Book – Matthew 1:1-17***
Ever thought all those 'begat's in the Bible were just a waste of space?
- ***The Man Who Tried to Keep Christmas from Coming – Matthew 2:7-18***
The Grinch had nothing on King Herod.

- ***There Goes the Neighborhood – Mark 5:1-20***
According to the people of Gadara, there is one thing worse than living next door to a demon-possessed madman.
- ***A Bad Case of Plank Eye – Luke 6:39-45***
It's going to take a lot more than a good ophthalmologist to cure this condition where you can't see the forest for the tree.
- ***You Want Me to Eat What? – Acts 10:1-23***
In order for God to use us fully, He sometimes has to change the way \ we look at things.
- ***The Dreadful Danger of Name Dropping – Acts 19:11-20***
Be sure your schemes will find you out.
- ***Similac©, Not Sirloin – 1 Corinthians 6:9-20***
For some people, growing up is hard to do.
- ***Sin Happens – 1 John 1:1-2:2***
Everybody does it, alright, and that's the whole problem.

IX. Three Things to Do Before Adding Humor to a Presentation

A. Analyze the humor itself

1. Suggestions

- Be both meticulous and merciless at this point.
- Make your criteria severe. Is the piece truly humorous? Not, is it almost funny, or funny for just a few people.
- Remember that the line between tasteful and 'over the edge' is sometimes a very thin one indeed.
- Recall that you can do some major, sometimes irreparable, damage to any sermon if a funny story or anecdote fails to deliver. You will appear either inept or pitiable, and neither result is in any way desirable.

2. Ideas

- Should you have any reservations, good advice is to take the piece for a test drive with several different individuals. Different ages, genders, socio-economic, educational and geographical backgrounds can provide a good indication as to whether an item is funny and also, whether it is appropriate.
- In the process, do not allow yourself the luxury of being offended by an honest response. Refrain from the temptation of trying to talk people into liking it, and under no circumstances be found guilty of attempting to explain the humor. If your test audience fails to 'get it,' the piece is either not funny, too complicated, or both, and should not be incorporated into a sermon.

B. Analyze the Audience

1. Suggestions

- Ask yourself, is the subject matter appropriate?
- Try to put yourself in the place of those who will hear you. If there is the slightest possibility someone will find the subject or premise of your humor objectionable, do yourself an enormous favor and cut it loose. No matter how much you may think it will add to the sermon, the risk is simply not worth taking.
- Remember you are not preaching to yourself, but to others. And the last thing you can afford is to come across as insensitive and overbearing, even where (and one might say, especially where) humor is concerned, for by definition this should be the lightest portion of the preaching event.
- Understand that for some audiences certain subjects are completely off limits. In employing humor, ‘shunning the very appearance of evil’ in this regard is an absolute necessity. A missed opportunity is always preferable to a train wreck.
- The primary thing to keep in mind is that a word once spoken cannot be recalled, no matter how much one might wish it so. When in doubt, it is simply better to refrain.
- Remember that for certain audiences, specific styles of humor are likewise taboo. To offer an example, certain ‘off the cuff’ observations occasionally provide a welcome breather in a sermon and an opportunity for the audience to catch its collective breath when the subject matter being addressed is especially somber or serious. In other situations however, the same utterance will succeed only in desecrating the mood you have created and provide a far too convenient opportunity for an audience to both mentally and spiritually disengage.
- Recognize that, in certain church settings, restraint is sometimes confused with reverence. A deafening silence following any attempt at humor will be a dead give away that a preacher is in the presence of just such an audience. Until one knows with some degree of certainty the humor level tolerance of a given group, it is a good idea to start light and be prepared to retreat.
- Remember, humor within a sermon is not a necessity, but faithfully declaring God’s message is. And one cannot place the latter at risk by selfishly insisting on the former. Learning flexibility in such situations is one of the best acquired skills a preacher can obtain.
- As a rule of thumb, the longer your relationship with a particular congregation, the more trust you develop, and the greater leeway they will allow you in matters of preaching, particularly in the area of humor. It is wise, however, not to violate this trust, particularly for something as fleeting and inconsequential as a cheap laugh.

C. Analyze your Motivation

1. Suggestions

- Why have you chosen this particular piece of humor?
- What kind of reaction do you hope to generate? Until you know what it is you wish to accomplish and how a particular piece of humor fits in to a particular sermon framework, you should forbear.
- Humor at its best may seem light, improvisational, even impromptu, but in reality, its use in a sermon context requires substantial thought and planning.

X. Conclusion - Parting Words on Humor and Preaching

- “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.”¹⁵⁵ - E. B. White
- “Wit is the salt of speech, not the food.”¹⁵⁶ - Tal Bonham
- “A mist in the pulpit becomes a fog in the pew.”¹⁵⁷ - Haddon Robinson
- Someone once figured out it takes seventy-two muscles to frown, and only fifteen to smile.
- “Humor allows the mental equivalent of a seventh inning stretch. People’s minds need a break now and then, and humor can supply it in a way that enhances the sermon. After momentary laughter, people are ready for more content.”¹⁵⁸ - Stuart Briscoe
- “We need to keep the comic spirit in theology as a safety valve from our own seriousness, for a faith without humor can become a relentless form of unmerciful dogmatism.”¹⁵⁹ - Conrad Hyers
- “The fall of Adam was a fall into seriousness. And we have taken ourselves, our circumstances, our achievements, and our beliefs quite seriously ever since.”¹⁶⁰ - Conrad Hyers
- “Without humor we become something less, not more, than human. We become not more divine but more demonic,”¹⁶¹ - Conrad Hyers

¹⁵⁵ Byrne, 557.

¹⁵⁶ Bonham, 201.

¹⁵⁷ Robinson, 141.

¹⁵⁸ Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, 72.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁶⁰ Hyers, *Vision*, 23.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 26.

- “Hell is the really serious place because there is nothing there to laugh at.” ¹⁶² - Earl Palmer
- “The success of humor lies in the ear of him who hears it – never in the tongue of him who makes it.” ¹⁶³ - Tal Bonham
- “The use of humor can be delightful or dangerous in an introduction. Nothing can warm up an audience faster than laughter. However, nothing can turn them off quite as fast as an unsuccessful attempt to be funny. They will not forget their first impression, and they will remember very little of what you say thereafter.”¹⁶⁴ - Tal Bonham
- “Having said all these things about the value of humor, I suggest that it is important to remember that a Preacher can become too interested in humor, miss the point of his calling, and sink to the role of a jester. Earlier we discussed the Humor Attitude and noted that an attitude can be likened to a sausage machine. No matter what materials were inserted at one end, it all comes out sausage at the other. A preacher who becomes obsessed with being funny loses his ability to communicate the gospel in all its seriousness. It all comes out as nonsense.” ¹⁶⁵ - John Drakeford
- “Humor can be a wonderful servant or a dreadful master.” ¹⁶⁶ - Stuart Briscoe
- “Of all people, the minister must be on guard for the overuse of humor. People come to church not to hear a clerical jester, but to hear a word from the Lord. Only when God’s Word can be clarified and better communicated through humor should humor be used in the pulpit.” ¹⁶⁷ - Tal Bonham
- “The humor of Jesus is an ally of joy and therefore joy is not an extraneous add-on to greater realities. There are no greater realities.” ¹⁶⁸ - Earl Palmer
- “First and surprisingly...don’t tell jokes! Leave comedy to the comedians...If your joke falls flat, you’ll go down with it. Everyone in the room feels uncomfortable and embarrassed when a speaker’s joke does the old lead balloon....Second, understand that fun is better than funny. Your goal is not comedy but connection - creating an atmosphere of fun, friendliness, and openness.” ¹⁶⁹ - Bert Decker and Hershael York

¹⁶² Palmer, 119.

¹⁶³ Bonham, 200.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 197.

¹⁶⁵ Drakeford, 93.

¹⁶⁶ Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, 72.

¹⁶⁷ Bonham, 202-203.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 119.

¹⁶⁹ Decker and York, 94.

- There is “an added benefit of humor: while it is hard to engage the emotions of a congregation, once you engage any emotion (humor, suspense, grief), it’s relatively easy to enlist the others.” ¹⁷⁰ - Haddon Robinson
- “Think funny, and you will begin to not only see the humor around you, but you will begin to use humor in communication. Look for the humor in the serious - it’s almost always there.” ¹⁷¹ - Bert Decker and Hershael York
- “The whole range of the comic - from gentle humor to biting satire - is employed. To appreciate this is to receive the gift of laughter and share in the humor of God.” ¹⁷² - Conrad Hyers
- “Humor, after all, is a very serious business – as a rule, the easier it looks, the harder it came.” ¹⁷³ - Mordecai Richler
- “A story told for its own sake may entertain or amuse an audience, but it gets in the way of your sermon. An anecdote works in the service of truth only when it centers attention on the idea and not on itself.” ¹⁷⁴ - Haddon Robinson

¹⁷⁰ Briscoe, Hybels, and Robinson, 134.

¹⁷¹ Decker and York, 94.

¹⁷² Hyers, *Laughter*, 6.

¹⁷³ Richler, xv.

¹⁷⁴ Robinson, 155.

CHAPTER SIX

SEMINAR RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Bejeweled Pig Snout Seminar was conducted on Monday evening August 14th, 2006 in the Chapel of the Westview Baptist Church in Shelby, North Carolina. Following a conversation several weeks earlier with the Associational Director of Missions, an invitation was extended to pastors, teachers, and other ministers of the Greater Cleveland County Baptist Association along with a number of students from nearby Gardner-Webb University and Christopher M. White Divinity School. The date was selected so it would not conflict with other Associational meetings, but unfortunately fell during the same week as orientation for the College. This resulted in a smaller turnout than expected, but interest was high on the part of those attending.

The result was a diverse audience, ranging from a first year college student to a three score and ten-year-old college music professor with dual degrees at the doctoral level. Practically all had previous ministry experience and included pastors, youth ministers, a children's minister, a music minister, and the director of Missions for the Association. One reason for such a varied turnout stemmed from the invitation, dispensed by the Association, being addressed to those "who believe that sharing the message of Jesus and a laugh should not be mutually exclusive events."

The seminar consisted of a Power Point presentation along with handouts distributed to the attendees upon arrival. It was billed as a two-hour presentation that was to include both an apologetic from Old and New Testament sources (with particular emphasis on the humor of Christ); an examination of the four basic means of

incorporating humor into sermons and other speaking opportunities; and concluding with three basic rules to consider before using humor in a public setting.

My greatest concern going into the Seminar was that there was too much material to cover in only two hours. Attempting to distill lengthy research on an interesting subject that one feels passionate about is a textbook recipe for excessive revelation, and too often runs the risk of offering the audience ‘a sip of water from an open fire hydrant.’

Another concern was the flow of ideas in the material presented. I am well aware of the dangers of spending so much time with a presentation, oral or written, to the extent that one stops seeing and hearing it in the same manner others do. To me, the construction of the seminar and the basic building blocks of the arguments presented seemed quite logical and easy to follow, but there was no guarantee the audience would find them so.

Although I am reasonably proficient with the PowerPoint medium, and have come to use it and appreciate its benefits more during the past couple of years, I still maintain the title of “low-tech guy in a high tech world.” As a result, I have an ongoing concern about the possibility of a breakdown of technology at some critical moment in a process like this one, particularly considering the length and complexity of this seminar. There was anxiety on my part about either myself or the audience becoming sidetracked if I had to pause to correct an electronic glitch. I suspected that such an occurrence would have serious negative outcomes for the overall presentation.

A final concern stemmed from the fact that the material was specifically slanted toward preachers and a preaching environment. Although I believed that much of the material would be beneficial for practitioners of proclamation in other realms, some of

the material was intentionally designed with preachers in mind, and I feared that those not in that particular faction might find some aspects of the seminar less than helpful for their own unique circumstances.

Fortunately, the majority of my concerns were unwarranted. First and foremost, the seminar came in under time. All of the material was covered, and a brief ten minute break was provided not only for human necessities, but also to give brains that had been operating all day an opportunity to reset and reorient in order to be able to receive additional information. This was especially important since the second half of the seminar leaned more toward the application side of the information provided.

The seminar seemed to flow well, occasional light chuckles, smiles, and knowing nods indicated that a connection had been established between speaker and audience and that the information passing from one to the other had both interest and value. I had originally planned to read aloud the humorous examples that interspersed the material, but then thought the better of it and told the stories without notes, just as I would have in a normal preaching engagement. This succeeded in not only providing a welcome break from the extensive amount of data presented, but also serving as a living example of the effectiveness humor can enjoy in a communication session. The chosen pieces, across the board, were deemed humorous by the audience, and their laughter proved to be some of the best feedback I enjoyed in this experience.

I was also fortunate in having no major glitches with the technological end of the presentation. My tenuous confidence in software, hardware, and personal proficiency was borne up in noble fashion and added an important dimension to the seminar. It was

most helpful in keeping the material before the audience in a way that mere oral communication would have been severely taxed to achieve.

Finally, the material proved strong enough to be helpful to everyone in attendance. Although the preachers arguably received the best of the evening, no one seemed disappointed by what they took away. There is no way of gauging long-term benefits of the seminar, but one can hope that certain information received on this evening might serve the attendees well at various other times and places in their future ministries.

Responses from requested questionnaires, completed before the participants left, were very beneficial in evaluating the seminar. High marks were received for an “excellent” and even “impressive” PowerPoint presentation. Information on this “interesting topic” was deemed “very helpful”, and especially so for "Seminary preaching students."

The material was described as “thought provoking” and by one especially generous soul, the “most comprehensive look at humor in preaching I have seen.” One attendee even confided that the seminar had “changed my view of humor,” and the “energy and enthusiasm of speaker” along with an “excellent reading list,” and a “nice booklet for future reference,” all received favorable reviews. Particularly encouraging were the comments that “The task of connecting the humor to the message was reinforced,” and for someone who “struggle[s] with humor...an outline to start from [as provided here] would be a help."

Lower marks were received for length and some inadvertently repeated items. One of the Youth Ministers offered the tongue-in-cheek observation that the low point of

the seminar lay in the fact that there were “No seat cushions at the back of the pew.” (An acceptable observation, since this was, after all, a seminar devoted to humor.) It was also suggested that my reading the quotes at the end was unnecessary as they were already contained in the handouts. My original intention had been to roll these various quotations onto the screen ‘movie credit’ style, but I was unable to perfect the PowerPoint technique of doing so prior to the seminar’s presentation.

Constructive suggestions toward future seminars included possibly breaking the material down into two or three more manageable units, and also making the material a bit broader in its appeal in order to be more usable for “all presenters of the Gospel.” Additional specific methodologies for non-preachers might also prove to be a beneficial addition.

Overall, the seminar received very generous marks from the attendees, scoring just over 9.3 on a 10-point scale. Highest scores were tied to the flow of ideas and the PowerPoint presentation, while the lower scores were reserved for the seminar surroundings and the immediate helpfulness in the participant’s ministry setting. This was an anticipated response due to the variegated (not all preachers) population of the audience.

The reactions and comments of the audience provided a good deal of food for thought. In addition to considering some of the suggestions from the attendees, I expect for the next presentation, I would prefer using video clips in place of the still photos for the Super Bowl commercials segment. In fact, perhaps only a couple of ads would be necessary if played full length. It might be possible to use one that was very effective in conveying brand recognition and sales over against another which, although highly

humorous, did very little to reinforce their sponsor's message (and as a result) ultimate sales of the product. These might be obtained from web sites which on an annual basis rank Super Bowl ads for entertainment value or perhaps by contacting the specific sponsors directly.

Another excellent idea would have been to provide real-life volunteers to provide the humor examples, or video clips of real-life preaching situations in which they were used. This would effectively alter the pace of the presentation and allow participants to temporarily unplug and redirect their attention, with a view toward making the overall presentation a bit more enjoyable and, hopefully, more memorable.

A lengthier format was suggested, and this would have permitted a much greater opportunity for audience participation. Specifically it would have allowed for gleaned specific anecdotes from those attending of their favorite humorous pieces that they had either used or encountered in their ministry or church attendance. These could even have been requested of attendees in writing prior to or upon their arrival at the seminar, then afterwards compiled and distributed back to them by mail, e-mail, or disc, as a thank you for attending. This would have provided both a nice follow up and a reminder of the time they had invested, while at the same time providing a useful tool for future use.

More refined refreshments would certainly have provided a nice touch but were eliminated in favor of time constraints.

Overall, the seminar proved to be a very positive experience and I trust it can be expanded and updated for the benefit of others in the future. The key to the seminar, and in fact to this whole study, is in remembering that humor is only a tool, but a very effective one when employed appropriately. It is both helpful and judicious to recall that

even within the serious business of the proclamation of the Gospel, there remains, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, "a time to laugh."

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VITA

Stephen Earl Ellis was born May 30th, 1960 in Goldbug, Kentucky. He attended Cumberland College in Williamsburg, Kentucky, graduating Summa Cum Laude in 1978 with an Area in Business Administration with emphasis on Accounting along with a minor in Economics. He married Jeanette Lorraine Taylor on July 17th, 1982, surrendered to the call to the ministry in May of 1985, and was ordained by the White Oak Mission Baptist Church of Corbin, Kentucky in September of the same year. He served the Ryans Creek and Fairview Baptist Church congregations as a bivocational pastor, and spent seven years on the road with the gospel group Horizon. He and Jean have three children - Seth Nathanael, born in 1988, Aaron Michael in 1993 and Devon Hope who was born in 1995.

After fourteen years in the secular workforce in banking and accounting fields, Stephen began his studies toward his Masters of Divinity degree in Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, which he received in 1999. During his time as a full time student, he also served as the pastor of the Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Boston, Kentucky.

Following his graduation, he accepted a call from the Parkway Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky as Senior Pastor and, during his six year tenure there, began the "Preacher and the Message" Doctor of Ministry program at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary under lead professor Haddon Robinson in January of 2003.

Stephen currently serves the Westview Baptist Church in Shelby, North Carolina as Senior Pastor, a position he has held since 2005. His thesis project, *The Bejeweled Pig Snout: Appropriate Use of Humor in Preaching* was completed in November of 2006.